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Assowaum, the Avenger; OR, The Doom of the Destroyers.

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TRACK," "ALAPAH, THE SQUAW," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

It was upon a bright though chilly morning, in the autumn of the year 18—, that a number of men might have been seen collected around a farm-house situated some few miles distant from the banks of the La Fave and Arkansas rivers. The dress of these men bespoke them to be chiefly composed of trappers and farmers; and, by their fierce gesticulations and stern demeanor, a stranger might easily have been satisfied that they were engaged in discussing no very pleasant topic of conversation.

The early settlers or squatters on the banks of the Arkansas were kept in constant dread by a band of desperadoes who infested their settlements, and committed all kinds of outrages upon the property and persons of the industrious and hard-working farmers, stealing their horses, and not hesitating to commit even murder, when necessary to prevent the discovery of their less-heinous crimes. The plans of this organized band of marauders were laid with great cunning; in fact, such was the ability they displayed in carrying out the details of their villainous schemes, that, as a general thing, they defied detection. In some few cases they were caught committing minor offenses; but the laws of the new State were so defective, that the rascals, in almost every instance, contrived, by legal technicalities, to escape, unpunished.

At the date of our story, two murders had been committed, and not the least trace could be found to lead to the discovery of the perpetrators of the horrible crime. Suspicion pointed to several parties in the settlement, who were noted for their idle and dissolute habits. It was also hinted that Assowaum—an Indian, whose

wife was one of the victims—was on the trail of the assassins, and that he possessed some evidence which pointed to the guilty parties. It was, however, determined that the citizens should form themselves into a secret society, for the purpose of ferreting out the murderers, and this body of men styled themselves the "Regulators."

On the morning upon which our story opens, a considerable number, not only of the neighboring farmers and hunters, but of those also who lived at quite a distance, had assembled around the little dwelling of Farmer Bowitt, who was one of the principal Regulators. No one was permitted to enter the house, however; for here two fat negroes, borrowed for the occasion from a neighboring miller, were busy preparing breakfast for the men, some of whom had ridden many miles since daybreak. In the meanwhile a large iron kettle had been hung before the house, over a blazing fire, to furnish a constant supply of boiling water, that the guests might occasionally fortify themselves

against the cool morning air with a hot and invigorating draught.

But, although the whisky-jug—which on ordinary occasions brings life and merriment among the men of Arkansas—circulated freely amid the group, yet to-day an almost solemn gravity seemed to have chained the tongues of the greater number. The Regulators, with gloomy earnestness and firm resolve depicted in their dark, sunburnt faces, stood gathered around a single man, who, with active gestures and nimble tongue, seemed to be imparting something to them apparently of great interest.

It was one of those mongrel beings, half-white, half-Indian, called in the backwoods a Canadian Frenchman—a half-breed, although his hue, almost a shade too dark, excited the suspicion of an origin held still meaner in the eyes of an American. He was relating, with lively gesticulations to those present, his errand in that part of the country. Coming from the Cherokee nation, in pursuit of horses which

had been stolen from himself and a friend, he had at last alighted upon their tracks, but had suddenly lost sight of them about five miles from this settlement. He had already turned in disappointment toward home, when he heard of the meeting of the Regulators, and had ridden over, not indeed in expectation of finding the beasts, but to call their attention to the affair, that, if the animals were taken through the country or offered for sale there, they might be seized.

The Canadian (for he called Canada his home) was a short, thick-set man, with long, glossy, black hair, dark and flashing eyes, teeth white as ivory, and projecting cheek-bones, as well as a somewhat flat nose, with large nostrils; yet his hue seemed scarcely darker than that of the men who stood about him. His garb, however, was completely Indian, even to the belt that he wore, which was made of red woolen stuff, embroidered with beads, and profusely adorned with the claws of panthers and bears.

The Regulators, after consulting about the matter, could not help remarking the singularity of the fact that so many of the tracks of stolen



ASSOWAUM, THE AVENGER.

horses led into their neighborhood, and here disappeared in a wonderful manner, or, at least, when once lost, could not be found again. They were still discussing the subject, when Brown, Jones and Cook rode up, and were welcomed with a joyous greeting by the men who were assembled before the hut. Almost at the same moment, Hatfield came up from the opposite side, and at once seated himself at the breakfast-table, declaring that he had already ridden eighteen miles upon an empty stomach.

When he had finished his meal, he approached the new-comers, to whom the Canadian was repeating his narrative, when Jones mingled in the conversation, and asked the half-breed if there was a white horse, with one black hind leg, among those of which he was in pursuit.

The stranger, astonished and delighted, replied in the affirmative.

"Then I have seen them!" answered Jones, striking his right fist upon the palm of his open left hand; "then, blast me, if I haven't seen them!"

"But where?" asked the Canadian, quickly and eagerly.

"About fifteen miles from here, late last evening, upon the ridge of hills that separates the waters of the Mamella from the La Fave."

"And which way did they take?" inquired the half-breed, anxiously; "were they upon the high-road, or—"

"They crossed the road at the very moment that I came up the steep hill from the opposite side," replied Jones.

"And how many men were with them?"

"Only one, as well as I could see."

"They are my horses!" shouted the half-breed, in delight. "A farmer on the borders saw them too, only he couldn't describe the man to me; he was too far off. But where shall I find the tracks?"

"The wind and rain must have washed them away," replied Jones, thoughtfully; "but when you are upon the ridge, just beyond the red house, if, after riding, say, four or five miles on, you find no tracks, either on the right or the left, your only chance will be to go to the bank of the Arkansas, which flows not far off, and inquire at the log-but that stands there. That will be your best plan."

"I will at least lose no time, then, though the scent is rather a cold one," cried the stranger. "I thank you for your information. Good-by, gentlemen!" And, without further ceremony, the Canadian turned to mount his pony, and pursue the thief. Brown, however, caught him by the sleeve of his leathern hunting-shirt; and, as the half-breed looked around in wonder, he said, in a friendly tone:

"Give us a half-hour yet. The scent, as you say, is rather a cold one, and you may waste time and labor in vain; you can certainly spare us the few minutes. Besides, your horse seems tired, and needs rest. If, in an hour, you think it worth while to set out in the pursuit, you can take mine, which is fresher, and you will soon make up for the delay. We can change again on your return."

"But if the fellow should, in the meanwhile, find a boat to take him down the river?" interrupted Jones.

"He will not do that so quickly, for steamboats are not yet very plenty on the Arkansas. Remain therefore awhile, and then take my horse."

The half-breed, who now cherished a faint hope of recovering his stolen beasts, nodded in acquiescence. He accepted the invitation of Bowitt, however, with even still more satisfaction than the advice of Brown, when the former requested him to take a seat at the covered table. He confessed, at first with some hesitation, that not a morsel had passed his lips since the preceding morning. Then, however, to the great terror of the negroes, he attacked the viands most voraciously.

"Gentlemen," said Brown, addressing those assembled, as soon as the half-breed had retired, "I must, in the first place, introduce to you a stranger, recommended to me by Mr. Rawson. He is a Regulator from Missouri, and wishes to make your acquaintance. He has hopes of effecting a union between us and certain gentlemen who hold similar views in the States to the North; and he is particularly anxious to be present at our meeting, in order to see the spirit that animates it. Is it not so, Mr. Jones?"

The man thus questioned bowed merely, with politeness.

"Since he has shown himself so ready," continued Brown, "to aid a man to recover his stolen property, who has applied to us for help and counsel, I do not think he needs any further recommendation, to obtain admission to our secret or at least select assembly. Do you not think so?"

"That's enough!" cried the men, while Hatfield stepped forward, greeted the individual thus introduced, and expressed his satisfaction at the prospect of thus becoming connected with the men of a neighboring State, a thing which in many respects was so essentially necessary.

"What was it you wanted to say to me, Brown?" asked Cook, turning to the latter, who had followed him a few steps apart.

"Do not stir from the stranger's side!" whispered Brown, in haste; "he belongs to the band—hist! not a word more. Tell Wilson, and do you two watch him. Have you your pistols?" (Cook nodded.) "Good!—I only wish that we could first get rid of those blacks yonder; I don't trust them—they might give the alarm."

"The story about the horses that he had seen was a lie, then?" said Cook, quickly.

"Hist! he is looking at us," whispered Brown; "we must not excite his suspicions. Let Wilson watch him with you, and then we must dispatch dinner as soon as possible, that the blacks may go about their business."

The two men now separated for awhile; but as the Canadian soon accosted Jones again, and engaged his attention by inquiring for further particulars concerning the horses, Cook stepped once more to their young leader, and said, in a whisper:

"We can't get rid of the niggers; they are to remain here the whole day. Whatever is to be done, therefore, must be done soon. I will take care that the black varmints do not escape, and give the alarm."

"Have you spoken to Wilson?" asked Brown.

"Yes—don't be uneasy; he is at his post. It is a capital joke; but it is time the meeting was opened."

At this moment, Hatfield approached Brown, and asked him if they should not commence business, as many of those present wished to return to their homes on the same day. Brown grasped him by the arm, led him aside, and in as few words as possible, informed him of his suspicions; expressing his firm conviction that the stranger, if he did not actually belong to the band of horse-thieves, was, at all events, a very crafty and dangerous accomplice of theirs.

"And what do you mean to do?" asked Hatfield, quickly.

"I will tell you by-and-by," whispered Brown. "I am only afraid of the negroes; they may betray all our plans if we arrange them here."

"You are right," replied Hatfield; "it seemed to me as if the stranger nodded slyly to one of them. Treachery here might ruin all. But stay—let me manage it. Bowitt must answer for them; he ought to know the people that he employs. I will speak with him. In the meanwhile, come to no decision until you see me enter the circle and take off my hat. But, go!—Jones is coming toward us; he may think it suspicious to see us whispering together."

Hatfield at once disappeared; and Brown, as the chosen chief of the Regulators of the county, summoned his comrades, and opened the meeting. In order to see and to be seen by all, he mounted upon the stump of a fallen tree; and, by way of introduction to the business which had brought them together, he spoke for awhile of the legality of the assembly, and asked them, in conclusion, whether they were firmly and earnestly resolved to carry out the *illegal* part of the duties required by their association, to wit, the exercise of the so-called lynch-law with firmness and unanimity, and to punish those, perhaps, even with death, who, by a majority of the Regulators, should be pronounced worthy of such a chastisement.

A loud and thundering "Yes!" from every lip, gave proof that all were in earnest, and firmly resolved to venture life and limb in executing that which they had undertaken.

During this interval, Brown observed that Bowitt, after having spoken for awhile with two of the younger members of the association, led them apart from the rest; at which the one seated himself upon a block of wood, close to the door of the hut, and began to examine

attentively the lock of his rifle; while the other, leading a saddled pony by the bridle, walked toward him, and entered into conversation with him.

"Well, massa," said one of the negroes to the two young men, as she took a basketful of chips from a black boy about twelve years old, "don't you mean to listen to the meetin'?"

"I am too young as yet, Liddy," rejoined one of the young men, with a laugh, "and I ain't handsome enough. None but good-looking fellows are allowed to be present."

"Oh, golly!" said the negress, "nonsense, that, massa!—Massa Hocker's thar!"

"Who, Liddy?"

"Oh—Massa—Massa Hopper's thar," cried the negress, in evident embarrassment. "Massa Hopper not very handsome neither. What's massa fixin' his rifle for? The Indians comin'?"

"You don't understand it, Liddy. When an army camps anywhere, they station outposts."

"Oh, golly—golly!" cried the negress, laughing so that her eyes rolled in their orbits like two large white balls, and displaying a double row of ivory teeth of which a shark need not have been ashamed; "outposts afore the kitchen door! oh, golly, golly."

The young men laughed likewise, jested and joked with the two negroes, who, while engaged in washing the dishes in the little hut, and in attending to the victuals that were placed over the fire, stepped alternately to the door, and seemed to take a singular interest in the proceedings of the assembly that was held at so short a distance from them.

"We have met here to-day, my friends," continued Brown, raising his head, and gazing around the circle, "to remedy the mischief that has brought us into discredit with all the States in the Union. But while we are able to oppose open enemies with energy and decision, yet this is impossible with those who glide in among us as friends and comrades—who flatter us and clasp us by the hand in the daytime, while in the night they have dealings with thieves and rascals from all quarters of the country!"

"But 'how to discover these?' you ask. 'How to unmask them, when they are able cunningly and craftily to elude the piercing eye of Justice?' True, it is no easy task; but there dwells a God above us, who oftentimes delivers sinners, when they least expect it, into the hands of the avenger."

At this moment Hatfield stepped forward, took his hat from his head, and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Call it accident or destiny," continued Brown, as he returned his glance, "that rendered me privy to an important secret, yet privy to it I am. And now, comrades, I hope that we have found the track upon which the wolf steals forth by night, and brings her prey to a place of safety."

"Where? what? What have you discovered, Brown? Who is it? Anybody here in the settlement? Anybody on the forks of the La Fave?" sounded the voices, in loud confusion, while Jones, who until now had stood leaning against a tree, with an air of great calmness and satisfaction, turned his head slowly and almost imperceptibly toward the hut, to see whether, in case of need, he should find the way clear to his horse, which was fastened near it, and at a short distance from the others. His eye met Cook's, who was standing close to him, though somewhat in his rear, and who said to him in a low and friendly tone:

"Well, what think you?—you could not have happened here at a more favorable time. They will open their eyes in Missouri, when they hear this."

"Yes—very favorable," said Jones—"very favorable—I—I am exceedingly curious" (he here turned his head toward the other side, and beheld Wilson leaning, with apparent indifference, against a tree not far off)—"yes, really, exceedingly curious to hear whom he means. It is a pity that I don't know them."

"Oh, you will become acquainted with them, perhaps!" replied Cook; "but listen!"

"Have patience, my friends!" continued Brown, soothing his eager auditors; "you shall at once hear all. A few weeks ago, an accident—if you choose to call it so—put me in possession of a secret, the meaning of which I was then unable to understand, but which within a short period has become clear and plain to me. It was an arrangement between two worthy men, by which one of them might

recognize a third, although a stranger, by means of certain words and phrases."

"Do you wish for anything?" said Cook, turning to Jones, who, at this moment, was about to pass him in order to reach the outer edge of the circle.

"Only a glass of water," whispered the latter, turning his head. "I'll be back in a moment."

"Liddy, a glass of water for Mr. Jones!" cried Cook, suddenly, and in so loud a tone, that all turned in wonder toward the spot. Brown smiled, and paused for a moment in his address, while Jones grew pale as a corpse. The negress, however, who had long been waiting for an opportunity to approach the Regulators, and especially the place where the stranger stood, caught up a pitcher containing the required draught, and waddled, as fast as her excessive corpulence permitted, toward the tree, beneath which Jones was standing.

He thanked her, took the pitcher and drank, whispering at the same time a few words to the woman, while Wilson also stepped forward, asked her for a drink and placed himself on one side of the stranger, while Cook stood on the other.

Brown had observed these movements with a hasty glance, and continued after the short pause occasioned by this interruption:

"A question concerning the river La Fave, a question about the pasturage in this part of the country, and a request for a drink of water, were the passwords by which this stranger was to establish his identity. And where, think you, have the traitors lurked among us?"

At this moment, Liddy came from the kitchen with a small basket of corn, and went to the stranger's pony, the bridle of which, as Cook remarked, she arranged in convenient order, while all were listening in breathless silence to the words of their young leader, eager to hear him reveal the scoundrels and traitors who had so long lived among them quietly and unsuspected.

"Gentlemen," said the leader of the Regulators, in a loud voice, after a short and solemn pause, "I was last night in the house of our former friend and neighbor, Atkins—he is the traitor!"

"A singular story that!" whispered Cook, with a smile, as he leaned his arm familiarly on Jones's shoulder, who gazed upon him with a steadfast glance, and cheeks white as ashes—"a very singular story, that!"

Jones felt that he was betrayed; he felt that the eye of the leader of the Regulators kept him in view, even when it was not fastened upon him; he knew that there was no safety left for him but in speedy flight, and that he must hazard everything to effect it. Softly, therefore, but quickly, thrusting his right hand beneath his waistcoat he grasped the bowie-knife that he carried concealed about him and cast another inquiring glance toward the negress, who had by this time completed her preparations.

This whole scene, which has taken us so much time to narrate, in reality occupied but a few seconds. At Brown's last word, a murmur of astonishment pervaded the assembly.

"But the knave," continued Brown, raising his voice and extending his arm toward the stranger, "who, like a thief, has glided under the cloak of night into our settlement—nay, who, as a Regulator from Missouri, has stolen into the midst of this assembly—is that man yonder?"

All turned, startled and indignant, toward the individual in question; but Jones had calculated upon this moment of surprise, for, with a hasty gesture, he tore the broad and sharp knife from its sheath, and brandishing it aloft in the air attempted to force his way to his horse. Those who stood nearest to him, taken by surprise, recoiled in terror. Wilson, however, who, at Jones's first movement, had divined his intent, well knew the object which he sought beneath his vest, and was perfectly prepared for him. Scarcely had the broad steel gleamed in the grasp of the unmasked traitor, when, with a quick, sure hand he seized him by the arm and the next moment the spy, hurled to the ground by the powerful arm of the backwoodsman, lay panting beneath his knee, struggling in vain against the strength which held him motionless as in an iron vise.

Astonishment and dismay seemed for a moment to have paralyzed the powers and bewildered the senses of those present; they crowded together, almost unconscious of what had hap-

pened; they stood lost in amazement at an event so strange and unexpected; but this almost magical stupor lasted but for a few seconds, then all their powers were at once aroused to prompt activity.

"Stop the black boy!" cried Brown, who, as soon as he saw the stranger secured, cast a quick, keen glance across the clearing, and at this moment remarked the bright jacket of the negro boy, who was crawling like a snake toward the thick bushes. His intention probably was to escape and warn the culprit's accomplices. Brown's call was unnecessary, however, for one of the young men who had been posted as sentinels had kept his eye upon the boy, whose conduct had, from the beginning, appeared suspicious, and as soon as he started for the thicket he leaped upon the pony which he held and plying it with whip and spur dashed over the fallen trunks that obstructed his path, and in a few seconds overtook the fugitive.

The latter, on seeing himself pursued in this manner, made no attempt to escape, but crouched close to the ground and, in piteous tones, begged his captor to do him no harm, as he did not mean to run away, but only to go a step or two from the house.

The two fat negresses seemed as if stricken with apoplexy; they did not, of course, attempt to leave the house, as flight on their part was a matter of impossibility. The three blacks were now confined in the small dwelling, around which a number of sentinels were stationed, who conversed, in truth, very sociably with these temporary prisoners, and particularly admonished them, for Heaven's sake, not to neglect the dinner.

In the meanwhile, Jones had been bound and led into the circle of the Regulators, where he stood with downcast eyes, indeed, yet with sullen obstinacy, refusing to answer a single question.

"Lay the hickory across his back!" cried several voices. "D—n the knave! tie him to a dogwood tree and let him peel bark!" "Hang him up by the hands and set the bounds upon him!" These friendly propositions had reference to their prisoner, who stood among them bound and helpless, and, with pallid face and set teeth seemed to expect the worst, yet by no means to fear it.

Several of the rude backwoodsmen prepared to put their threats in execution; one of them, especially, displayed great promptness in peeling off the strong bark of a papaw, in order to bind the prisoner to a dogwood tree. But Brown interposed and said, calmly:

"Hold! leave the man as yet unharmed; so long as we have a prospect of reaching our aim without recourse to violent measures, it is better to do so. Atkins is still in our power, and he at any rate must know more of these matters than this fellow, for I am well convinced that night before last the two were perfect strangers to each other."

"Then he lied when he said that he had seen my horses, and he would have sent me upon a fool's errand into the Mamella mountains!" cried the half-breed, stepping forward, his eyes flashing with anger; but Brown held him back and said:

"He has seen your horses most certainly, for I have not the slightest doubt that he was the man who brought them into this country."

"Ha! then he shall—"

"Hold!" continued Brown, seizing the furious half-breed by the shoulder, "they must be here; Atkins can not yet have conveyed them away again, although he may intend to do so to-night."

"We will go there at once, then!" cried Hatfield. "If we find the beasts with him, the proofs will be clear as day."

"I fear not," said Brown. "I was in his farmyard this morning, and I observed its entire plan and arrangement. If he has the horses in his keeping, they are certainly not within his fences, and there must be a spot somewhere behind the field or the cattle-yard—in the low bottom, probably, that is thickly grown with reeds—where the beasts are kept fenced in by a sort of natural inclosure, perhaps by the dense cane itself, or by trees intentionally felled for this purpose."

"But then the entrance to it must be from his land," cried Cook, impatiently.

"Of course," replied Brown; "at least, I can not imagine it to be otherwise; but that is all one, he can not be held responsible in law for what runs free in the wood."

"Oh, d—n the law!" said Steele, now step-

ping forward, and pushing back his cap from his forehead angrily, "we haven't met together to ask what the law would say to the business. D—n the law, I say again; we are resolved to maintain our own rights, and when we are once convinced that they have been attacked, why, all this rigmarole about law is nothing to us. For this, we have chosen you for our leader; if it don't suit you, say so, and another will take your place."

Brown was about to reply, but Hatfield interrupted him, and asked to be allowed to speak; then turning generally toward the assembly, but in particular to the man who had last spoken, and who now seemed to have a majority of the Regulators on his side, he began as follows:—

"Gentlemen, you all know me, I believe, and none of you will think that my zeal in the service of the good cause is less than his own, but—Mr. Brown is right. It is not enough for us now to know that Atkins has acted as an accomplice of the horse-stealers, even if we find proofs of the fact on his premises; we want to be satisfied that he continues to act so, and in what way he contrives to do it. That he is helped is clear as day. Tie that fellow yonder, if he stirs a foot out of the hut," he said, interrupting himself, and pointing to the young negro boy, who at once glided quickly into the kitchen again in evident embarrassment, "keep a sharper watch upon the fellow, or he may spoil our whole plan—he has mischief in his head," he cried, addressing the sentinels, who had been listening with too much attention to his words. He then continued: "As I everywhere hear that Atkins is seldom or never from home, he must have people at hand to assist him in the business; these must, of course, live near him."

"Johnson's hut is but a short distance from his house," said Wilson.

"Confound the rascal!" cried Hatfield, completely losing his calmness at this discovery—"the dog is in the plot then, and the game he played with the horses was false. May lightning blast the rogue!"

"But, hold!" he continued, thoughtfully, "as matters stand at present, cunning and caution will prove more effectual than idle noise and hasty violence. I agree with Mr. Brown that we should consider the matter with care, that we may not act rashly and, perhaps, foolishly. We have still several hours to spare before we are obliged to come to a determination. Mr. Brown will, perhaps, be so good as to inform us of the plan which he has arranged."

"Willingly," said the young man, ascending the rostrum again; "it is easily told, and will be as easily understood. We are in possession of the magic phrases which secure us admission to our neighbor's hiding place; but no one knows that we are in possession of them. This secret is still ours. My plan, therefore, is this: let us send a man with several horses, this evening, to Atkins's—a man with whom he is unacquainted; this Canadian here would answer, perhaps."

The individual in question shook his head. "No, no," he said, "I have been there already—this morning at daybreak; he didn't see my horse, indeed: that stood tied to the fence, but he saw me; there are several women there."

"That is unfortunate. Well, then, we must find some one else; some one who will go to him with a number of horses, being careful not to take them as far as the house, however. He must then repeat those three questions, and Atkins will, doubtless, lead him to the place where he concealed the beasts. The rest of us in the meanwhile will lie in ambush, near at hand, and, at a given signal, rush forth upon the scene of action."

"That is all very well," said Wilson, "but where shall we find a man, before evening, whom Atkins does not know?—for he knows almost everybody in all Arkansas."

"What was your errand at Atkins's?" asked Hatfield, turning to the Canadian.

"What was my errand? To inquire after my horses," replied the latter.

"And what did he say?"

"That he had seen none."

"That was evidently a lie!" cried Brown. "It will, indeed, be hard to find a man. Does he know you, Wheeler?"

"I should think so," replied the latter, laughing, "for the last five years."

"And you, Jenkins?"

"As well as he knows his nearest neighbors."

"And you, Williams?"

"He knows us all, Mr. Brown," answered the person last addressed. "We must go out of the settlement to find our man—unless upon the road, perhaps, we—"

"Stay!" cried Cook, "I have it—a capital idea! The old man won't mind the loss of one or two days; we can supply him with plenty to eat, and fodder for his cattle."

"Who?" asked several.

"Didn't you see a wagon cross at your ferry this morning, Wilson?" inquired Cook.

"I have been here since last evening," replied Wilson, slightly blushing, "but what of that?"

"They can't, at most, have got further than opposite to us on the other side of the river, and therefore can scarcely be two miles from here in a straight line," replied Cook. "An old Tennessean, with his two boys, drove the wagon. One of them, the boys or the father, must help us. Atkins can not know them; and, if matters are cunningly managed, the old fox, will, perhaps, fall into the trap."

"But who will ride across," asked Wilson, "and how will a man find them?"

"Oh, nothing is easier than that," rejoined Cook. "You will cross the river here, ride straight through the bottom-land to the left of the little lake, and when you reach the road, look for the track of a wagon. If the travelers have already passed by—which I don't think very likely—you can't fail to overtake them in a short time; and, if they haven't passed, why, so much the better; all you have to do, is to ride to meet them."

"But it would be much better, Cook, that you should go yourself," interposed Brown; "you have already made acquaintance with the man, as I hear, and it will be easier for you, probably, to persuade him to assist us, than for one of us."

"Very well," replied Cook, resolutely, "I am agreed. I am ready to do my part, and I don't think it will be difficult to prevail upon the old man to lend us a helping hand; I would bet my head that he will come himself."

"That would settle the affair," cried Curtis, laughing, and rubbing his hands together. "Lizards and alligators! I now begin to think we shall get upon the track of the ruffians who are so free with their hot lead and cold steel; and then,—God be gracious to them!—they shall have a taste of hemp, until they cry, 'Enough!' But what shall we do with the prisoners in the meanwhile? I mistrust the little nigger; the black rascal has already tried twice to escape, and I haven't the slightest doubt that he would have made a straight line for Atkins's."

"We shall have to bind them," answered Brown, "for we must not now run the chance of being betrayed."

"The women, too?" asked Wilson.

"The boy certainly," said Hatfield, "but a guard will answer for the two women; and if the little rascal makes the slightest attempt to escape again, why, we will tie him to a dog-wood-tree, and let him dance! Where is the bark?"

"You had better take a cord," replied Bowitt; "there are some under the bed in the corner. Is Jones well secured?"

With these words, he stepped to the prisoner, and was in the act of stooping to inspect his hands, when the Missourian, who, in some inexplicable manner, had contrived to liberate his hands, rushed from the tree to which he had been fastened, and darted at the top of his speed toward the wood. He did not run far, however. At the moment when he took his first leap, at which Bowitt recoiled rather in astonishment than in alarm, Wilson was standing about ten paces distant from the spot; he dashed after him with the swiftness of the wind, and, after a short race, overtook him. Such was Jones's fury at finding himself in the hands of his enemies, and lost without help, that, as his pursuer was in the act of extending his hand, to take him by the collar, he turned and attacked his far more robust antagonist, with his fists and teeth, with the fury of despair.

And, in truth, it required all Wilson's dexterity to avoid the savage assaults of the infuriated man. At last, however, a powerful and well-aimed blow with his fist felled the fugitive to the ground. He was now bound, hand and foot, and carried into the house, where, guarded by four sentinels with loaded rifles, all chance of escape was hopeless.

Cook now saddled his horse, and rode at a rapid pace toward the river, to overtake his

acquaintance of the morning. Brown and Hatfield, in the meanwhile, posted sentinels in every direction, in order to cut off all communication with the rest of the settlement, and to prevent Atkins from being warned of the danger which impended over him; while the remainder of the Regulators superintended the preparations for dinner, and then, after all had partaken of the meal, they reclined in the shadow of the single group of trees which had been left standing in the clearing, in order partly to arrange their plan for the evening, partly to repose, that they might awake at sunset, refreshed and strengthened for new exertions.

CHAPTER II.

In the wild and sparsely-settled forests of the West, where the lonely and scattered farm-houses are often separated by vast, impervious thickets, the inhabitants feel the more sensibly the value of a neighbor—a value which consists, not merely in their social and friendly intercourse, but in mutual aid, assistance, and support, when these are needed, and when the powers of a single man do not suffice for the emergency. Whether in plowing the newly-cleared field, in rolling together the enormous logs, which must be burned to prepare a surface for the fruitful maize—whether in digging out a canoe, or even in quilting the coverlets beneath which the new settlers protect themselves on the approach of winter against the keen north wind, which finds free entrance through the open crevices of the rude log-huts—it matters not: let the summons be issued, and, with ax or plow, they at once appear, and labor more industriously and severely for a neighbor than they would for themselves a single day in the whole year.

But if the men assemble willingly and promptly to undertake such tasks, how much more ready are the women when they are called upon for aid and counsel in a case of sickness! Not one, who can possibly leave her house, will wait for a second message; but, hastily collecting their medicines, they mount their horses, and ride as joyfully and gladly to the scene of mourning as if they were going to a festival or merry-making.

Mrs. Atkins, in truth, was no favorite in the neighborhood; for, in the first place, she scarcely ever visited any one, and was seldom seen at the prayer-meetings, which told especially to her disadvantage; but, in addition, she never appeared at a quilting-frolic, or a log-rolling, at which her husband seldom omitted to be present—a circumstance which could not fail to produce an estrangement between her and the dames of Arkansas. It caused the more surprise, therefore, that she now sent around this nocturnal summons, and with such pressing entreaties for aid. She would not have done this, unless it had been a case of great danger, and few were willing to miss the opportunity of displaying their medical and pharmaceutical skill. The old grudge was at once forgotten; and before noon the next day, several, for the most part married and aged dames, furnished with all imaginable powders and elixirs, but especially with an almost incredible quantity of calomel, had arrived to "save the dear little creature's life."

The sick child was certainly in a very serious and even dangerous condition; a violent fever burned in its veins, and it suffered probably severe internal pains for it was impossible to keep it quiet; it moaned and screamed almost incessantly. The mother paced the chamber in despair, resigning her infant to the hands of strangers, among whom widow Fuller had obtained considerable reputation in children's diseases, for, as Mrs. Mullins told Mrs. Atkins, in the strictest confidence, she had cured three children of illnesses that no other mortal knew of, that is to say, in the backwoods; the five others, indeed, who died under her care, had been seized with incurable symptoms, as she, Mrs. Mullins, had seen with her own eyes in three of them, and as to what concerned children and their diseases she herself had her full share of experience.

Besides Mistresses Fuller and Mullins, there were present Mistresses Bowitt, Smith, Pelter, Hopper, Cowles, and two Misses Hicks, who, as they themselves confessed when hard pressed, had passed the somewhat dangerous age of eight-and-twenty, and in addition several other farmers' wives, partly from the southern, partly from the northern bank of the La Fave.

They had at once taken possession of Atkins's

"sleeping-house," as it was called; and Mrs. Fuller, in particular, seemed to exercise a somewhat despotic authority in the little circle, which was by no means conceded to her in other matters in the settlement. Here, however, on account of the above specimens of her skill, it was freely recognized.

But while the women, as noon was long past, were still busied in alleviating the pains of the little sufferer, partly by cold cataplasms to the temples, partly by hot ones to the abdomen, and in cramming it with electuaries, decoctions, and calomel, enough to destroy six less hardy children, three Regulators were riding slowly along the road which led from Bowitt's to Atkins's, pausing from time to time, as if they were waiting for some one who was to overtake them. At last, when they had ascended a gentle hill, a horseman was visible upon the opposite heights, who came spurring along at full speed, and who, as soon as he caught a glimpse of the men from a distance, waved his hat, as if directing them to stop for him.

It was Cook. His horse was bathed in sweat; and, with a face flushed with heat, he at last drew bridle by the side of the three friends, Brown, Curtis, and Wilson.

"The d—!" he exclaimed, as he clapped his hat upon his head, and, striking it violently, crushed it deep over his eyes; "why do you ride on so, as if the loss of a moment were fatal? Look at my horse once! see what a condition he's in! I shall petition the society for a new one."

"We meant to wait for you on this hight," said Curtis, "as we—"

"And why not just as well at Bowitt's, that we might start together like reasonable Christians, and ride on in company? What do you think? I found the Tennessean all ready, saddled and bridled, on the high-road."

"Well, did he consent?" asked Brown, hastily.

"And suppose he didn't?" cried Cook, turning toward him; "then I should have taken a nice ride for nothing!"

"But will he come? speak!"

"To be sure he will!" cried Wilson, laughing. "Look at his face! he can hardly contain himself for joy. But out with it, Cook!—time presses; and if we stop here much longer, we may excite suspicion."

"And yet we must remain here until we have arranged everything together," replied Cook. "Why didn't you wait where you were?—it serves you just right. When you have dispatched your own dinner, you think other men can fast until the next meal. But, now in earnest, Stevenson is coming, and with his eldest son, and three of his horses."

"Counting the one which he rides?" inquired Brown.

"Why, of course: no horse-thief rides his own horse," cried Cook. "Oh, Brown, you are sadly behind the times. Those are the two main qualifications for the trade, namely, to be able to ride for weeks on the stretch with half a dozen beasts on a string, and then again to take enormous journeys on foot. Every horse of his own that he rides is a clear loss. But what plan have you contrived?"

"Hasn't Hatfield informed you of it?"

"No; he referred me to you, saying, that I would soon overtake you. The lazy fellow was lying under a tree, and seemed preparing himself for work this evening."

"But has he not told you that you and Curtis are to pass the night at Atkins's?"

"Yes, but nothing else."

"And where is the Tennessean?"

"Up at Bowitt's with his son. The old man was all fire and flame when I told him of our plan, and would have taken all the boys along; but when the women heard of the phievish knaves in the neighborhood, there was a fine hubbub, and they declared not one of them should go; but the old Tennessean stood his ground, and at last consented to leave the two younger behind to protect the family. Then to quiet the women they were armed with knives and pistols, at which Ben, the youngest boy, received a particular warning, 'not to hurt himself' and away we rode at full speed. Now, let us hear your plan."

"It is simply the following," replied Brown.

"The Tennessean—what is his name?"

"Stevenson."

"Stevenson, then, is to remain at Bowitt's till near evening, and leave in time to reach Atkins's about an hour after dark. You two—Cook and Curtis—will accompany us to

A kins', and stop there under some pretext, while Wilson and I ride on."

"Why, then, did you come down with us? You might just as well have stayed at Bowitt's," said Cook.

"That Atkins might not conceive the slightest suspicion," replied Wilson. "When he sees us ride quietly by toward home, he will naturally suppose that all's right, and think no further of the matter; for, as Brown is the leader of the Regulators on the La Fave, he will of course imagine, from his riding home, that the meeting has broken up."

"But where do you stop in the meanwhile?"

"We shall ride to Wilson's, leave our horses there, and return on foot."

"Look out for Curneales! I would not trust him a rifle's length!" cried Cook.

"And we as little," rejoined Wilson; "but to lead him astray, we shall shoulder our rifles and walk toward the salt lick, that lies to the south of my house. From there, even if we don't start till dark, we can reach the appointed place in time."

"And where will you lie concealed?"

"Wilson, here, who has often been in Atkins's house, thinks that he can point out, with tolerable accuracy, the place where the secret entrance is. However this may be, the hiding-place must be in the cane-brake, which runs from the rear of Atkins's house to the La Fave; it can be nowhere else, and Waters assured me lately that it is impossible to penetrate it. He had shot a wild turkey, and heard it drop, but he couldn't get at the bird, the fallen and felled trees lay in such confusion upon one another."

"How many men do we muster for the attack?"

"About eighteen; but they are enough, and more than enough."

"And what are we to say to him, if he asks after Jones?"

"Curtis knows; yet I can tell you in a few words. Hatfield has taken Jones with him to the Petit-Jean, to attend a meeting that's to be held there to-morrow; after which, as that river lies somewhat nearer the State of Missouri, and is therefore exposed to thieves from that quarter, a body of Regulators are to be sent to the Missouri borders."

"And will he believe it?"

"Why not? he'll think that Jones himself has persuaded him to adopt this course, in order to lead them from the tracks of the rascals that haunt this quarter. You might give him a hint to that effect. When you are in the house, and you hear a signal—a shrill whistle—at once secure all the weapons there, for we don't wish to shed blood, that is, if it can be avoided."

"But all the women that were there this morning?"

"They are in our way, indeed, but it can't be helped. Besides, even if they are all there, they will sleep in the other house, and will not hinder us in the least in the execution of our project."

"Wouldn't a rifle-shot be a better signal?"

"A shot! in the middle of the night, and not even the moon shining? No, I don't think that would answer. Why alarm the neighbors, when we can dispatch the business quietly?"

"Have you thought of the mulatto? He is, of course, in his master's secrets, and if any of their accomplices are near at hand, he will be certain to give them warning."

"We shall occupy all the paths," said Curtis, "and he will be sure to fall into our hands, if he tries it."

"He might strike through the wood?"

"Why, the night will be as dark as pitch—I hardly think he would attempt it," replied Brown; "but that can not be helped; when we have once caught the chief accomplice in the act, he must disclose the names of the scoundrels who stole Hatfield's last horses, and among them I haven't the slightest doubt we shall find Alapaha's murderer."

"Come, then," said Cook, "our long delay upon this hill might excite suspicion if we were seen by any one. I wish we had the Indian with us to-night; he would do us excellent service. I almost begin to think he has quit the country, improbable as I thought it at first; for not a soul has seen him for these nine or ten days."

"Mullins declares that he saw him in the forest yesterday," said Curtis, "but it was in a very thick spot, and only for an instant. He told me also that he had called to him, that he shouted in the direction in which he had observed him, but he saw nothing more of him."

"He will come back," said Brown; "I would swear to that, for he made me give him my word not to leave this part of the country until Alapaha was avenged, and it is not probable that he will leave me to do the work alone."

"We shall see, we shall see," said Cook, shaking his head; "if he has the least thought of coming back, and wishes anything to be done in a cause that is his as well as ours, he would have done far better to remain, and look into the matter on the spot—but we shall see."

The men, in the meanwhile, pursued their way again, and now approached Atkins's house, which lay at the foot of the upland. The latter was standing at the door, apparently expecting them. When they reached the fence, and he saw that the stranger was not with them, he advanced to meet the Regulators as far as the outer gate; a question concerning him was upon his lips, but he feared to utter it.

"How is the child, Mr. Atkins?" inquired Brown, reining in his horse, and stopping near the old man.

"Thank you! thank you! not so very well, sir. I fear we shall lose the poor little thing. Well, is the meeting over?"

"For the present. The good women are all here yet, I suppose?"

"Almost all; eleven at least; enough to kill half a dozen children; but my wife will have it so. Well, has anything been determined upon? Won't you dismount and rest for a while, gentlemen?" he added, interrupting himself in his question. "You have plenty of time to reach home—or perhaps you will remain here over night?"

"No, I thank you, Atkins," said Brown, declining for himself, at least; "my uncle has ridden over to Roberts's and I must return home and fodder the cattle; otherwise, I would gladly accept your invitation."

"Hark ye, Brown, you may ride on alone, then," said Curtis; "I will pass the night here; I have nothing that calls me home."

"Good; and I will keep you company—that is, if Atkins has room for us, and the women haven't taken up both chambers," cried Cook.

"There is room enough," said Atkins; "dismount! dismount!—besides, I am curious to hear news about the meeting. What have you done with the stranger?"

"He is gone with Hatfield to the Petit-Jean; but I will tell you more of that in the house," replied Cook, as he leaped from the saddle, which he then unbuckled and hung across the fence. Curtis followed his example, and Brown, bidding them a friendly good-by, spurred after his companion, Wilson, who had in the meanwhile ridden slowly onward.

Atkins now led his two visitors into the house, where they found a young man, a stranger, seated near the fire, whom their host introduced to them as Mr. Weston, "his nephew," adding that he had come to the La Fave to settle here, but that he wished to get acquainted with the country first, and would live with him until he found a place that suited him.

"I must be greatly mistaken," said Curtis, "but I think I have seen you before, or at least, some one that resembles you uncommonly."

"It's possible," replied Weston, smiling somewhat constrainedly. "Oh, I recollect! it was when I was on my way to Little Rock, and I stopped in this part of the country for a few days. I think I met you once when hunting."

"Yes, yes," said Curtis, "I now remember; it was above here on the river, where you were camping. My memory did not deceive me then, and—"

"You mentioned that Mr. Jones had ridden to the Petit-Jean," said Atkins, interrupting him. "Will he remain there long?"

"No," replied Curtis; "he wished us to inform you, if we rode by here, that he would be back by to-morrow noon at the latest."

"The Regulators in that quarter have a meeting, then?"

"Early to-morrow morning, so far as I understand. Hatfield has taken several from the La Fave across with him."

"But I thought certain suspected persons in this neighborhood were to be arrested and questioned," said Atkins; and the interest which he felt in the answer was evident to all who gazed at him.

"Yes, that was to have been done," said Cook, carelessly, as he stepped to the chimney and turned his boots in the flame, in order to dry them; "but we couldn't quite agree upon

the business, as there was not sufficient cause for suspicion against any one; and then Jones as well as Brown did not seem altogether to approve of the proceeding."

"Mr. Brown didn't," cried Atkins, in astonishment.

"No, but we hope to carry it through next week, for something must be done," rejoined Cook, "or the scoundrels will, in the end, laugh in our faces."

"Weston, be so good as to look a little after the horses of these gentlemen here," said Atkins, turning to the young man who had risen and stepped to the door. "And take the saddles from the fence," he continued, as the other was about to hasten from the apartment; "the infernal cows chewed up a blanket for me last night again—and then go over to my wife; she has something to say to you."

Weston nodded in acquiescence, carried the saddles into the porch and then passed around the house. Here, however, instead of seeking out the little stable in which the horses of the strangers were standing, he looked back to see if he could be seen from the dwelling, then leaped over the fence and the next moment disappeared in the adjacent forest.

CHAPTER III.

"WHAT can keep Weston?" asked Cotton, walking impatiently back and forth in the little hut which for some days had served him as a lodging and a place of refuge. "He promised this morning to bring the news at once, and the Regulators have dispersed by this time; they won't keep sitting for a week up yonder. Trisior and rattlesnakes! I don't feel easy here; the thought of being seized and lynched isn't calculated to quiet a man's nerves. I shall be obliged to say, 'Good-by' to this part of the country. The d—! take such a life!"

"We have still time for flight," replied Johnson, yawning, as he lay extended upon the only bedstead in the chamber. "But I should like mighty well to take with me the new 'lot' of which Jones speaks, and which are to follow next week. Thunder and lightning!—seventeen horses! That's worth waiting for."

"I don't see how we can take them all away," muttered Cotton; "and then the other horses that Weston has scented out will come in at the same time. If the Regulators can't follow such a track, they must be blind."

"We sha'n't ride these through the woods," replied Johnson. "Weston has bargained with the captain of a steamboat, who is to take them on board at Fort Gibson."

"Why, that will be the very way to lead them upon our trail!" cried Cotton, pausing in his walk, and opening his eyes with astonishment; "if they take the Indian with them and—"

"What of that?" returned Johnson, laughing; "they can't overtake the steamboat with their paddles, and in Little Rock we shall land the beasts again. If they should actually pursue us in another boat—and you know how seldom it is that two are lying at Fort Gibson at the same time—they would infallibly lose the track on the broad roads that lead from Little Rock, even if they should stick to our trail as fast as that, which is mighty doubtful. But be this as it may, we shall in any case have time to reach the Mississippi swamp, and from there cross to the island; and the La Fave won't see me again so very soon."

"It will be very sorry," replied Cotton. "But yonder comes Weston. Well, it is time—the sun is just setting."

Cotton was still speaking, when Weston leaped the low fence, and the next moment entered the narrow door of the little hut.

"Thunder and lightning!" exclaimed Johnson, starting in terror from his couch, as he observed the deathlike pallor of the young man's face; "messenger of evil, what news bring you? Are the Regulators—"

"No, no, whispered Weston, shaking his head, "we have nothing to fear from them."

"What's the matter, then?" asked Cotton, in a surly tone; "you look as blue in the face as spoiled buttermilk. Out with it!—what's the matter?"

"The Indian is here!" panted forth the other, throwing himself, exhausted, upon the only chair that was in the chamber.

"Well, if that's all," cried Johnson, with a sneer, as he resumed his former position upon the bed, "you might have spared us the fright. What confounded nonsense, to come rushing in

as if a dozen yelping Regulators were at your heels! How did the meeting terminate? Where is Jones?"

"On the Petit-Jean, with Hatfield. The Regulators there are to hold a meeting to-morrow. Cook and Curtis are at Atkins's. Nothing has been decided upon concerning us. Things in that quarter seem safe for the present. But you shouldn't make so light of the Indian, Johnson: he is on your trail."

"Upon my trail?" cried Johnson, somewhat startled again, but still half-incredulous; "how should he hit upon my trail? Hatfield and the whole band were upon it, and had to ride home with a flea in their ear."

"Have you been this afternoon along the path that leads from here to Atkins's?" asked Weston.

"Yes, about half an hour ago. Why?"

"As I was hastening along the path about that time," replied Weston, "just where the young gum-tree has fallen across the way, and was about to turn around its top, I saw something move upon the path. For a moment, I thought it was a bear; but soon, to my great surprise, I recognized the Indian. He was bending down, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, and walking directly toward me. I didn't see how I could avoid meeting him, and I was about to step from behind the bush which hid me from him, and address him; but all at once, when hardly fifteen paces off, he came to a moist spot, where he found the track which he seemed to be seeking, plainly and distinctly imprinted upon the soil, as I afterward saw. Here he stopped, knelt down, took his tomahawk from his belt, and compared the track which he had found there with the measure of another which he seemed to have marked off upon the handle. Suddenly he rose, and, turning his back to me, brandished the weapon with a threatening gesture in the direction of this house, and then left the path, turning to the right, through the forest, directly across the first low hills."

"And the track?" asked Johnson, eagerly.

"Was yours," replied Weston. "As soon as the infernal red-skin had disappeared over the hight, I sprung from my hiding-place, and examined the track. Your right shoe was as fairly and clearly marked in the soft earth as if you had wanted to make a cast of it."

"Didn't you follow the Indian further?" asked Cotton, while Johnson paced the chamber rapidly, stamping his foot, and grinding his teeth.

"I am pretty certain—" began Weston, but Johnson interrupted him, and asked hastily:

"What became of him?"

"To tell the truth," replied Weston, "I didn't care to be caught by the Indian following his own tracks; but still I resolved to steal after him as far as the top of the hill, as I knew that from there I could see down along the whole ravine, as far as the thicket of green briars. So I crept on as softly as possible until I reached the ridge (for the red rascal might easily have stopped somewhere upon the hight, I thought.) But he was nowhere to be seen; and I was just going to crawl back, when it struck me that he might have turned toward the La Fave again, through one of the side-rifts, or gone through the pine-thicket upon the summit of the opposite hill, toward the higher mountains. Suddenly, deep down in the ravine, I thought I saw a gleam of fire. Then, again, all was dark; but, after a short time, I saw the light once more, and was convinced that it was the Indian, and that he was lighting a fire, in order, probably, to camp there for the night."

"And where is the spot?" asked Johnson, hurriedly.

"Don't you know the place, just this side of the green-brier thicket?" replied Weston—"there where a heap of pines were blown down the mountain by the last hurricane?"

"Somewhere near the place where we shot the wild-cat upon the little elm?"

"Just about there!" cried Weston, quickly; "as well as I could tell, he must be camping exactly in that range."

"Then he can have chosen no other spot than that beneath the jutting rock, where he will be tolerably protected from the dew and rain," answered Johnson, almost hissing forth the words from between his tightly-set teeth, while he took his rifle from above his bed, where it always hung, and examined the pan and the flint.

"What are you about?" cried Cotton, in amazement.

"I'll spoil the red spy's scent!" replied Johnson, grating his teeth.

"Nonsense, Johnson!" exclaimed Cotton, in a tone of vexation. "You will bring the whole neighborhood down upon us. What the d—l is it to you whether the red-skin knows the length of your soles or not? So long as it's a two-legged beast that leaves the mark of his shoe in the mud, there is no danger; but with horse-tracks it is different."

"You don't understand it," returned Johnson, darkly. "This isn't the first measure that the hound has taken of my foot. I know, from sure authority, that he has done it on other occasions. Now, there is no longer any doubt that he is on the right track; and—the worst of the business is—he knows it; therefore he must die!"

"Confound me if I understand you!" grumbled Cotton, pushing together the brands on the hearth with his foot. "If the business isn't very pressing, I'd advise you to defer it till—"

"The Regulators have me by the throat, and hang me on the nearest oak! Ha! my man of sense? No—there's no safety for me now, so long as the red-skin lives; therefore he must die, I say!"

"I should like to know what you have against the red-skin," rejoined Cotton, in the same tone of ill-humor. "When the—the—business there—with the squaw happened, you were miles away down the road, and suspicion is as little likely to fall upon you as upon any man in Arkansas; and as to the horses—"

"But I tell you," cried Johnson, now driven to extremity, "the horses have nothing to do with it, and—but what's the use of kneading the dough over again?"

"A—h! s—o!" replied Cotton, pausing in astonishment, as if a new thought rose to his mind; "does the wind blow from that quarter? So, then, it was the other business—"

"Go to the d—l with your questions!" muttered Johnson. "If it were only right dark!—the ground here burns under my feet."

"Ah, ha!" continued Cotton, thoughtfully, without heeding this rough address, "if the matter stands so, then I would myself advise you to be on the look-out. But why have you never said a word to me about it? I wouldn't have betrayed you."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Weston, in great astonishment. I can't make out a single word of your rigmorole; what does it all mean?"

"A pretty time this to be telling old stories!" replied Johnson, with a scornful laugh. "No, I must be off; I can't stand it here any longer."

"Johnson," said Cotton, "I don't like the idea of the rifle; the report in the middle of the night would be heard too far, and why the useless noise? I have prepared the arrows we spoke of lately. Do you understand how to handle the bow?"

"Like an Indian," replied Johnson. "I lived for seven years among the Shawnees; but—I don't know—the bow always seemed to me a mighty uncertain weapon; give me the rifle!"

"Well, at least try the arrow once," said Cotton, as he ascended the low ladder to the upper story, and at once returned with a bow made of tough hickory, and five arrows. "There," he added, "shoot at something—stop, here's a potato—I'll lay it in the ashes. Now, step back to that corner, and see if you can hit it."

Johnson smiled, weighed the bow for a moment in his hand, then fitted the arrow to the string, took aim for a few seconds, and the next instant the wooden shaft, piercing the mark, stood quivering in the soft soil which formed the hearth.

"Capital!" shouted Cotton, "a master-shot! Hit the red rascal in that fashion, and he won't follow your track far."

"Yet it's an uncertain weapon," said Johnson, still half irresolute, although somewhat stimulated by the success of his trial.

"Uncertain! The poison on the rough point will kill in five minutes," whispered the hunter. "Hit the Indian with it in the arm or the finger only, and he couldn't reach this hut were he to make a straight line for it as fast as his legs could carry him."

"Is the poison sure to kill?"

"As sure as I hope to escape the clutches of these scoundrelly Regulators."

"Oh, let the Indian live!" said Weston, in a tone of entreaty; "why shed his blood? there

has been enough spilt already. I feel afraid to be with you; you talk about a human being's life, as if it were a deer's, or a bear's."

"There, he's at his nonsense again!" said Johnson, moodily, while he still held the arrow irresolutely in his hand. "Mind your own business, and leave us alone. The Indian must die!"

"Then I'll have nothing further to do with you!" cried Weston, resolutely; "his blood be upon your heads. To-morrow, I will return to Missouri. I joined you to steal horses, but it's nothing but blood! blood! It makes me shudder! Good-night!"

He rose, and was about to leave the chamber.

"Stop!" cried Johnson half dismayed, half menacing, and he sprung toward the door, holding the point of the poisoned arrow toward the young man, though probably without thinking of it. "Would you betray us?"

"Help!" screamed Weston, starting back in terror from the dangerous weapon—"murder!"

"Fire and brimstone!" cried Cotton, angrily, as he pushed the still distrustful Johnson away from the door, and placed himself between him and the young man, "quit this nonsense!"

"I didn't think of the arrow," said Johnson; "but why does Weston want to go?"

"Partly because I shall be missed at Atkins's, and then I will not witness another murder," replied Weston. "To think that I would betray you is not only base, but silly. I am too deep in the business to hope for pardon, even if my oath did not bind me."

"Do you still remember that oath?" asked Johnson, in a tone of warning.

"Yes!" said Weston, shuddering and speaking in a whisper. "You have nothing to fear from me, but another time handle such weapons more carefully, and—let him live! Johnson, let him live!" he added, as he grasped the arm of the gloomy man. "Perhaps there is still safety for us without his blood. Reflect that the poor fellow has lost his wife—"

"Confound me if I'll listen to this prating any longer!" cried Johnson, angrily, shaking the young man from him. "Go—away with you! you can be of no use to us here; but, Weston, remember your oath, and, even if the Regulators should pardon you, do not think to escape my vengeance!"

"Spare your threats," said Weston, earnestly, "I am no traitor; but I will henceforth have nothing to do with you. To-morrow, I shall go back to Missouri. I am too old to learn such a trade."

"Or too young," said Cotton, laughing. "Well, good luck, Weston, if you are in earnest; and, if I prosper, in a year or two, I'll follow you to Missouri."

"Good-by, Johnson!" said Weston, holding out his hand to him; "no ill-will at parting."

"Good-by!" replied the other, surlily, and half turned from him.

The young man left the house, stepped across the fence, and the next moment the bushes which stood thickly around the dwelling hid him from the eyes of the two men, who watched him as he departed.

"We were wrong to let him go," said Johnson, walking restlessly up and down in the chamber; "I don't trust the fellow."

"He's true," rejoined Cotton; "I know him—he'll betray no man—but there are others that I don't trust."

"You mean Rawson?" said Johnson, stopping in front of him.

"Yes!"

"He is too deep in the business. If all were as sure—"

"Oh, yes, now; but let him once fall into the mire—let him see a rope on one side, and hope of safety on the other—and then wait and see what he does; or, rather, don't wait for, in that case, I would sooner depend upon my legs than upon his honesty. I don't trust him."

"It's growing dark," said Johnson; "I'll go, but—I don't know—I would rather take the rifle."

"You're a fool!" cried Cotton—"the d—l! you shoot as well with the bow as with the rifle; and with the one there is no danger of discovery, while the other may betray you. If they find the body—"

"I shall be far away by that time. Do you think I mean to let those infernal Regulators get a noose about my neck?"

"But the nine horses?"

"You may attend to them alone—to-morrow I start for the island; I can pack up my

traps to-night, and about daybreak I'll mount one of Roberts's horses that graze between here and his house. Before they find the Indian, I shall be beyond their reach."

"But Rawson—"

"May follow when he sees danger ahead; he knows where I am going. Will you come with me?"

"I've promised Atkins to help him carry off the next lot, and I'll keep my word—I must keep it, for my purse is confounded low. That last business brought me in but a mere trifle. When I have filled my pockets, I may, perhaps, accompany Atkins to Texas. You will take the rifle, then?"

"Rifle and arrow," said Johnson. "First, I'll try the poison, and if I ain't exactly pleased with my shot, why, the lead may do the rest."

"Are you sure you can steal up to him safely?"

"If he camps where I suspect, yes, very sure—there isn't a dry leaf on that rock to rustle under my feet," replied Johnson, exchanging his heavy shoes for the light noiseless moccasins.

"Well, if it must be done, at least, strike sure," said Cotton.

"Never fear; if I once get within shooting distance of him, he is mine; besides, the spot is lonely enough, and he must call loud if he expects to be heard. Where will you stay in the meanwhile?"

"Here; I'll brew a stiff toddy while you are gone, that you may find something warm when you get back. So then, Heathcote—"

"Let that matter rest, and brew your drink—that will be more profitable."

"Don't keep me waiting too long," cried the hunter, as the other turned to depart.

"You can easily think that I sha'n't take a seat by him first," said the other, gruffly, as he drew the door to behind him, and then glided with noiseless but rapid steps through the gloomy wood toward the nearest ridge of hills, from which Weston had descried the Indian's fire.

The night was dark as pitch; not a star was to be seen; the sky was covered with black clouds, and the low and gloomy rustling of the mighty trees announced an approaching storm. Far up on the mountain-ridge, which separates the waters of the La Fave from those of the Mamella, a solitary wolf was howling his melancholy night-song, and the owl answered, mocking, from the dark pine-tops, in which it hoped to find protection from the coming tempest. Both man and beast sought a cover near the warm hearth, or in the dense cane-brake. The murderer, busied with his bloody thoughts, walked onward upon his dusky path, holding bow and rifle grasped convulsively in his hand, careless of the threatening storm; and as the angry elements raged with increasing fury, his eye flashed more boldly and fiercely, for in this strife of nature he found his greatest security. He well knew that if the Indian was camping on that spot, he would be sure, in such weather, to seek the protection of the projecting rock, which would defend him as well against the rain as against the falling trees, and then it would be impossible for him to hear the steps of his approaching enemy; the rustling and roaring of the trees and bushes in the forest would drown every signal of his approach. Revenge was his as soon as he had found his victim.

Advancing with great circumspection, he followed the course of the narrow ravine, although he might have chosen a more direct way to the well-known spot; but it is no easy task, in a starless night, to keep a straight course in the forest, and even the practiced backwoodsman is unwilling to attempt it, unless impelled by pressing need. That he might not wound himself by some mischance, he had wrapped a thick woolen cloth around the points of the poisonous arrows, and with his rifle upon his left arm, with his right feeling his way, he ascended higher and higher until he had reached the fallen pines, and now knew where he stood.

Just before him the ravine made a kind of elbow, and close beyond it, was the stone beneath which the Indian was probably lying. This stone was obliquely opposite to his approaching enemy, who was advancing on the other side of the ravine. First of all, therefore, Johnson resolved to reconnoiter the ground, for the howling of the wind relieved him from every fear of discovery. Avoiding all unnecessary noise, however, he crept beneath the trees which had fallen crosswise

over the ravine; left his rifle here, where he could immediately find it again, that the weapon might not hinder him in his stealthy progress, and crawled like a serpent toward the angle which still separated him from his victim.

His heart beat almost audibly—yonder, outstretched before the fire, lay the red son of the forest, unsuspecting of the danger which threatened him. His weapons were lying by his side, and, leaning upon his right arm, he was gazing thoughtfully at the flickering, vacillating flame. Johnson raised himself with a convulsive effort, and glanced keenly across to mark the spot, to which he should send the deadly shaft, for the distance that separated them was scarcely ten paces. But here he met with an unexpected obstacle; the Indian's outspread blanket, which he had set up to the windward as a protection against the obliquely dashing rain, concealed the greater portion of his body, so that nothing but the forepart of his head and his right arm were exposed, the rest of his frame being hidden by the woolen screen. It is true that Johnson could have taken a sufficiently accurate aim through the blanket; and if he had had his rifle with him instead of his bow, he would not have hesitated for an instant; but the idea, now occurred to him, that the blanket, even if it did not cause the arrow to swove from its mark, might deprive it of its poisonous properties; in short, he was afraid to shoot with this weapon at an unseen object.

In addition to this, he was disturbed by a fear which he was unable to shake off; his agile and vigorous enemy, whom he knew to be extremely resolute, might, if slightly wounded still retain sufficient strength to overtake him, and brain him with his tomahawk.

Besides, from the manner in which the blanket was spread, he needed only to make a circuit of at most twenty paces to the right to reach the tall elm, which stood on the declivity of the height, and the warrior's breast would lie exposed beneath him, a broad, sure mark which the fatal arrow could not fail to hit.

The first flash of lightning now gleamed through the conflicting elements, and shed its pale spectral light upon the scene. Shivering, as if seeking help, the gigantic trees waved their huge arms to and fro in the dazzling gleam, the next instant a deeper darkness enwrapped the surrounding landscape. Johnson now rose, but at this moment a stone slipped from beneath his right hand, with which he had until now clung to the projecting roots of an oak, and it rolled to the bottom of the ravine. He paused, motionless, cowering close to the ground, then raised his head slightly to watch the effect of this inopportune noise upon the Indian.

The sound had not escaped the watchful ear of the savage. He had stretched his head above the blanket to look beyond the circle of light diffused by the fire. Johnson, however, was lying in the shadow of the oak, which grew from the declivity, somewhat lower than the spot where the Indian lay, and his glances roamed over and beyond him. A second flash, more dazzling than the first, now illuminated the ravine, and the murderer shrunk back in terror; but the lightning seemed to have blinded the Indian also, for he pressed his hand quickly against his eyes for a second or two, and then, apparently composed, sunk back into his former position.

Johnson watched him for a moment, and then crept about five or six paces backward, where, even had it been bright daylight, he could not have been seen by his enemy. When here, he clambered up the right acclivity of the glen, as far as the elm-tree, directly above the Indian's resting-place, strung his bow, fitted the deadly shaft to the string, and rose quickly, yet carefully, to take his aim—when an involuntary sound of astonishment and terror escaped him, for—the place by the fire was vacant—Assowaum had disappeared!

Before he could even grasp a thought, or stir a limb, he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and, looking around, gazed with terror upon the angry, menacing face of his enemy. He saw the arm of the red warrior raised aloft; his tomahawk flashed in the light of the fire beneath, and he sunk, senseless and speechless, struck to the ground by a blow from the flat surface of that dangerous weapon.

Terrible was his awaking. The gleaming lightning crackled and hissed through the waving tree-tops; the peals of thunder seemed to shake the very earth; and the rain fell in

torrents. All Nature was in an uproar, but the baffled criminal lay bound to the root of a hickory-tree, fettered and gagged, unable to stir a limb or utter a word, deserted amid the raging of the elements. In vain he struggled, with the strength of despair, to break the bands which confined him, or at least to free an arm from the knots which cut him almost to the sinews; in vain he stretched his limbs, so that the blood started beneath the sharp leathern thongs which held him bound; the knots were well tied, the bands strong—Assowaum had bound them. Faint and exhausted, he was compelled, at last, to desist from his almost frantic exertions, and he lay panting and senseless upon the earth.

The storm had passed, but the water still streamed from the leaves like heavy rain; the wind chased the dark clouds onward, and, here and there, the bright disk of the moon cast its pale, silvery light upon the earth through a thin veil of mist.

Johnson had just recovered from his second swoon; his limbs shook with the cold, and, for the first time, the frightful thought flashed across his mind that the Indian had left him here, never to return; that Cotton, after waiting in vain for his reappearance, had taken to flight; and that he would here perish slowly of hunger, if some compassionate wolf did not put a speedier end to his existence.

He could already hear their shrill tones from the neighboring mountains—they were gathering together after the storm, to prowl in common after their prey; and here, where he now lay, he had often remarked their tracks, crossing the ravine, and leading from the hills toward the river.

Almighty Heaven! was he doomed to perish by so terrible a death? The howling approached nearer—the wolf scents his prey at the distance of many miles. Again the unhappy wretch struggled to snap his bands asunder; he ground his teeth upon the gag, he strained his sinews until the blood threatened to spring from his veins. Despair gave him the strength of a giant, but he could not break the Indian's bands. Now suddenly he lies still and stiff as if hewn out of stone. Whither does he listen so anxiously, and full of hope? why does he fix his eyes so steadfastly upon yonder dark strip of wood, down along the ravine? The wolves are not howling there; their cries resound from an opposite direction.

No, it was not the wolves that he heard, but a call—a well known, friendly call; it was the call of the owl, the secret signal of the leagued culprits. It must be Atkins or Cotton, perhaps both. They had come to save him; and here, here he lay, manacled and gagged, unable to stir a limb, or utter a cry, in order to point out the spot where he was perishing. But the sound came nearer and nearer, the calls of the seeker were louder and more frequent; now he was approaching at the upper extremity of the ravine. Johnson could plainly distinguish the outlines of his form upon the darker background of the trees; again the cry of the owl sounded, louder and more urgently, at first three, then four times in succession. The captive twisted and writhed like a worm, but all his efforts could not loose his bands or remove the gag from his mouth.

At last—at last, the steps sounded nearer; the seeker had crossed the ravine—he knew the spot where the Indian had lain—his course would now lead him close, close by his friend. The call echoed again, and the hunter listened, bending forward as if to catch the slightest sound. Johnson strove with his utmost strength to stir the leaves with his foot, to shake the young trees to which he was bound: all his efforts were in vain! The wind still stirred and rustled in the branches, and the leaves were soft and wet; the foot, that groped convulsively among them, produced no sound.

The form now approached—it was Cotton. Johnson could plainly distinguish the hat which he wore, could see his pallid face. He was advancing directly toward him; twenty paces in the same direction, and he would step upon his body! But now he stopped—again the same cry resounded, and the seeker looked around on all sides; not that he expected to see his friend—he listened merely in hopes of hearing his answering voice. His eye roamed almost unconsciously over surrounding objects, except that he cast, at times, a timid, anxious glance down into the ravine, where he doubtless thought the Indian's body must be lying.

He now turned—he seemed to have changed his plan—he listened once more toward the

rustling wood, to satisfy himself, perhaps, whether that moaning cry of the wolves was the expected call of the owl; and then, when convinced that he was mistaken, he glided quickly and noiselessly into the nearest thicket.

All was over!—hope of rescue had departed; and the captive lay, helpless and motionless, upon the ground. He no longer heeded the howling of the wild beasts; death was indifferent to him, if not desirable. A single glance of defiance, of powerless fury, he cast up to the clear and star-bespangled sky, and then closed his eyes, as if with this glance he bade adieu to life and hope!

CHAPTER IV.

DINNER was over; the dishes were washed and set away; and the inmates of the cottage, with their guests, were seated familiarly before the door of the little dwelling, talking now of this matter, now of that. Rawson had drawn his stool near Mrs. Roberts and her charming daughter, and held the hand of his betrothed in his own; while Harper took his place at Ellen's, and Barker at old Roberts's side. However strange and diverse the directions which the conversation took, it invariably came back to the subject of marriage; and Harper had been already asked, for the third time, why he did not look around after a wife, to comfort him in his old age.

"And help me die easy, eh?" cried Harper, with an inward laugh.

"In a certain sense—yes," said Mrs. Roberts, "though that could not be the chief object, at all events it might be the last; but, to tell the truth, I hardly know what you mean."

"Well, they tell a story in Tennessee," replied the little man. "A woman there actually—but I don't know whether I ought—here—"

"Out with it!" cried Barker. "Here are two young women who might perhaps learn something from it."

"Yes, yes, but whether that would benefit their husbands!" rejoined Harper, shaking his head.

"You really make me curious, Mr. Harper," said Mrs. Roberts, "if it would do for the girls to—"

"Oh, it is a perfectly harmless story," replied Harper, "and happened to the justice of the peace in Randolph county."

"It did happen, then?" asked Mrs. Roberts.

"Oh, of course! The poor man had been very sick with an inflammation of the lungs, or something of that sort; and as his wife doctored him day in and day out with nothing but calomel and castor-oil, he grew weaker and poorer every day, so that the doctors—a couple of quacks were practicing in that neighborhood—gave him up, and said he must die. His faithful wife stuck to him to the last, but they say that the poor fellow suffered terribly, and that he couldn't die, as he had probably something on his conscience. However, at last he was dead; the neighbors were called in, and the next day—it was in summer, and very warm—the man was buried."

"His widow cried and moaned incessantly. At last one of her women-neighbors asked her how the poor man had really died."

"Ah, good heavens! my dear Mrs. Sewell," replied the mourner, "you should have seen how the good soul suffered; he kicked, and twitched, and twisted, and caught at the coverlet with both hands, so that I couldn't open them again, nor he either, for he must have had inward convulsions, the dear, good man! Then I laid my hand softly on his mouth, and held his nose with the thumb and forefinger of my right, and he went to sleep as sweetly as a little angel. It was a great comfort to me to see him die so easy, after all his sufferings."

"Why, goodness me, she smothered him!" cried Mrs. Roberts, starting from her seat.

"Smothered? oh, no!" replied Harper, smiling, "only helped him die easy. It's true it was a good deal talked about in the neighborhood for a time; but after a while the widow moved up into Kentucky, and there the business ended."

"It's frightful!" said Marion, "and you can relate that with such a smiling face?"

"The thing seemed to me so comic," returned Harper; "certainly a new picture of connubial tenderness."

"Well, well," said Roberts, now joining in the conversation, "how do the steam-doctors drive business in Arkansas? Long Godwin, the peddler, who was here two weeks ago, and

was present when they found the body—Barker, you were one of them, I believe—?"

"Yes, but what were you going to say about Godwin?"

"Ah, true—he cures all diseases with steam and calomel. He put two of Lockwood's children under the ground in one week; and day before yesterday when he went to Basset's, who has been living for the last two months on the bit of land that he bought of Pelter, and he paid very dear for it too—"

"Well, the steam-doctors are well enough," cried Barker, "if they'd only leave the plaguy, p'ison stuff out of their medicines. A real steam-doctor ought to cure by sweating, and nothing else, and that they've learned from the Indians. But the fellows nowadays cram their patients with lobelia, and other like horrible stuff; and make them draughts out of red pepper, hot enough to burn the life out of their bodies. But this I know—they sha'n't come near me!"

"I really believe Barker has been a steam-doctor himself, he knows so much about it!" exclaimed Harper, laughing.

"When you once get a wife, Harper," replied Barker, "you won't want a steam-doctor; she'll make the house warm enough for you!"

"I have nothing to fear on that point. I don't know, indeed, how I could get one, unless I were to do as my brother did, and set myself up in a lottery."

"Set himself up in a lottery, Mr. Harper?" asked Mrs. Roberts.

"Why, the thing was very simple," rejoined Harper. "He offered six hundred tickets for sale, at ten dollars apiece, for girls, and widows under thirty—you ought to have been on the examining committee—the prize was to be himself, together with the six thousand dollars they brought him."

"But, Mr. Harper—"

"Well, he didn't sell more than about five hundred and thirty; he had sixty or so left, and he had strong hopes of winning himself back again. But no—a young girl, who brought three witnesses to prove that she was only one-and-twenty, won him, and he is now the happy father of a family. But it would be hard to dispose of six hundred tickets here in Arkansas."

"Not if you were put up as the prize," said Marion, smiling. "I am very sure that purchasers would flock in from all quarters."

"And would you take a ticket?"

"Why not?" cried Roberts; "one may very well win what one is in no need of. If she happened to be lucky, she could give you to a friend—to Ellen, for example. What say you?"

"Say?" rejoined Harper; "I should have few objections to make."

Rawson in the meanwhile had listened to the conversation, but seldom joining in it, however. He held an outspread turkey's wing in his hand, with which he brushed away the flies and mosquitoes when they lighted upon his betrothed.

Mrs. Roberts also took up a fan, for the heat was oppressive.

"We shall have a storm," said Roberts, throwing off his coat, "the air is so sultry. I must look at the thermometer. By-the-by, Rawson," he added, as he rose and walked to the door of the house, "do you know who those people were with the wagons, near where I met you at the salt-lick? Why, it was a Tennesseean, and an old neighbor of mine—Stevenson, a capital old man! I was delighted to see him again; and, Marion, you have no idea how the girls have grown—really you wouldn't know them."

"Oh, why didn't they stop here?" asked Mrs. Roberts. "It's so seldom one can, get a sight of old friends. Do you know Stevenson, Mr. Rawson?"

"Not that I remember," replied the latter, "and still I have a pretty good memory. Stevenson! I know people of that name in Tennessee, but probably not this man."

"He was on the other side of the Arkansas when the last murder was committed," said Roberts, who now returned with the thermometer in his hand, "and he saw the murderer—ninety-five degrees—it's astonishing!"

"It's impossible!" exclaimed Rawson, starting.

"No—look here—ninety-eight—over ninety-eight degrees," replied Roberts, who attributed Rawson's exclamation to his surprise at the degree of heat, and he held the thermometer nearer to him.

"Indeed!" responded Rawson, quickly recovering his composure; "but how could that be?"

"How could what be?"

"How could Mr. Stevenson have seen the murderer? They said that the man shot himself, for they had discovered no traces of any one besides."

"Nonsense!" answered Roberts, shaking his head. "Stevenson was standing behind a tree when the two passed him, and in less than five minutes he heard the shot. He swears he could recognize the fellow among a thousand. If you had come out upon the road a hundred paces further up, you would have fallen in with his camp. He is a capital old fellow; he would have pleased you mightily."

"I don't doubt it," rejoined Rawson, "but—"

"Well, tell me, Roberts," said Barker, interposing, "how is that thing that you have in your hand, and that you call a thermometer, really contrived, that you can see whether it's warm or cold?"

"The quicksilver rises when it's warm, and the colder it is the more it falls."

"And does the weather regulate itself after that?"

"No, the thermometer regulates itself after the weather."

"But you told me once that in 1829, in the Green Mountains, it was so monstrous cold there only because they hadn't a thing like that."

"If Heaven help us!" cried Roberts, bursting into a loud fit of laughter.

"Well, it was cold enough that winter," said Harper. "I lived at that time in Cleveland, on Lake Erie, and the quicksilver fell Heaven knows how much below zero. An old Pennsylvanian, that I lived with, declared that it would have fallen a great deal lower if the thermometer had been longer."

"Does Mr. Stevenson intend to stop for any time in this neighborhood?" inquired Rawson, who until now had been gazing upon the ground in deep thought.

"Oh, no; he is going direct to the place where he intends to settle; it's somewhere at the foot of the Ozark mountains. Our land here on the La Fave pleased him uncommonly, and he seemed quite inclined to remain here; but his wife and daughters are so terribly afraid of the horse-thieves—for the rascals, as they heard on the Arkansas, where they stopped for two days, I believe, and bartered an old pair of steers for new ones—"

"Well, the women needn't fear on that account," interrupted Barker. "We shall soon settle matters with the scoundrels."

"Certainly," rejoined Rawson, "the people represent the business as more dangerous than it really is. The La Fave has a far worse name than it deserves."

"Holla! what's the matter with the dogs, there?" cried Roberts, leaping up from his chair. Poppy is barking away, and now they shoot across the field as if the d—l was at their heels!"

"They are after wild-turkeys," said Marion. "As Ellen and I were walking down by the brook before dinner, we saw a whole flock."

"And why didn't you tell me of it at once? I haven't shot a wild-turkey in a week. Will you come along, Barker?"

"Certainly," replied the latter, entering the house to get his rifle, which he always carried with him; "and, if I ain't mistaken, the dogs have treed them already."

"Yes, I know Poppy's voice; but we must be quick, or they'll fly down into the bottom, and it will be hard to follow them there."

With these words, the two men ran swiftly along the narrow path which led by the fence of the cornfield, and soon disappeared among the trees.

Mrs. Roberts and Harper now endeavored to enter into conversation with the preacher on various subjects, but to-day Rawson seemed averse to discourse; his answers were short and irrelevant, and his thoughts seemed busied with other matters.

The two young girls, however, as they walked, arm-in-arm, in front of the little dwelling, found sufficient entertainment in conversing, not of their future plans, for both seemed carefully to avoid all allusion to these, but of their childhood and their youth, recalling all their favorite sports and pleasures.

"Ah, dear Ellen," said Marion, pausing, and glancing in her friend's face with a sigh, "those were pleasant and happy times; then we knew care and sorrow only by name. The transition

from that happy age to riper life is so insensible, and comes so gradually, that, before we remark it, all those sweet days are far, far behind us, while before us an abyss—" She stopped suddenly, as if she feared to complete the sentence, and turned away her head, that Ellen might not observe the two bright tears that trickled from her eyes.

"Why are you so sad, Marion?" asked her friend, in a caressing tone. "You are on the eve of marriage, and I should think a union with the man one loves should not render one sad and sorrowful, although I will confess that I should feel somewhat anxious in resolving upon such a step. Have you any cause for grief?"

"No, dear Ellen," whispered Marion, still turning from her companion a face that was wet with tears; "no—I am a foolish, silly child, and—and I ought to look at the future with joy and confidence. But hark! there are two shots; they seem to have found the turkeys. Well, we shall now have something to do this afternoon," she continued, turning with a smile to Ellen; but in her friend's eyes also she saw traces of tears, and she said, quickly and anxiously: "Ah, Ellen—good, dear Ellen! what is the matter? See, I am such a spoiled and selfish child, that I have paid no attention to you; I did not notice your dejection and silence. May I not know the cause?"

"Yes," replied Ellen, smiling through her tears, "you shall know it, but not to-day. In a short time, when you yourself are more calm and composed, then you shall hear all; but then," she added, in an affectionate tone—"then you must help me: in return, perhaps I can do something to assist you."

"Ah, that you could, dear Ellen!"

"What is the matter, then?"

"Mother is calling me, if I am not mistaken—wait, I will be back in a minute," replied Marion, and she hurried into the house. Her mother had not called her, but she wished to escape from the presence of her friend, and to resist the impulse which urged her, with almost resistless might, to confide to her all her cares and grief. She felt that even a thought of Brown was sinful, and that her aim henceforth must be to forget him, and to live solely for the duties which she owed a husband to whom she seemed so dear.

The men now returned from their hunt, laden with their booty, and the discourse became general again; while the girls had enough to do in plucking the feathers from the turkeys, a task that was attended with considerable difficulty, as both maintained that it was a long time since they had seen any that were so fat.

Rawson, in the meanwhile, had shaken off the feeling which had disquieted or disturbed him, and recovered his usual calmness; nay, he seemed really on this evening to lay aside the grave and severe manners of a Methodist preacher, and was cheerful, nay, even gay; never, indeed, had he appeared to such advantage even in Marion's eyes. Mrs. Roberts was delighted, and old Roberts twice took Barker aside, and gave him in confidence to understand that he believed Rawson was transformed; for, in the first place, he had been almost six hours in the house without preaching, and then he had a kind of carelessness and boldness, not only in his tone and manner, but even in his movements, which he had never remarked in him before.

"He is an entirely different person this evening," he cried again, after a while, rubbing his hands together. "Confound me, if it ain't true!—he has altered wonderfully, but greatly to his advantage, Barker—greatly to his advantage."

Roberts did not escape hearing prayer, however; for, before retiring for the night, Rawson uttered a long and fervent supplication, to which the men could not avoid listening.

At breakfast, on the following morning, their plans were arranged for this important day, and Mrs. Roberts proposed that they should all set out together for her future son-in-law's dwelling, to put it in order and eat dinner there; and in the afternoon they would ride over to the house of the justice of the peace, which stood scarcely a mile distant, where the marriage ceremony was to be performed. Mr. Rawson perfectly agreed with her in this arrangement; but he begged the company to wait for him a while, as he had first to ride a short distance, and would return in about an hour.

"Well, Mr. Harper and Mr. Barker, you will remain with us to-day?" said Mrs. Roberts.

"Come, come, you must not say no; Mrs. Barker won't be angry; we must celebrate this day together, and I wish Mrs. Brown was here too; but it can't be helped. Dispatch your business quickly, therefore, Mr. Rawson, whatever it may be, and you shall find us all ready when you return."

Rawson mounted his horse, which was brought to the door by a negro boy, waved his hand once more in farewell, and rode at greater speed than was his custom, when he left Roberts, or any other house in the settlement, down the narrow country road.

CHAPTER V.

AFTER Weston had left Atkins's house, the two friends had made themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted, and Curtis now stepped to the door and gazed thoughtfully at the dark clouds which were gathering in heavy masses in the west.

"I shouldn't wonder if we get a touch of the storm," said Atkins, who stood at his side. "See how the thin mist drives on toward us. I hope we ain't going to have a hurricane. Six years ago when I was on White river, the clouds looked just so, and soon after the d—l was loose."

"Were you on White river six years ago?" asked Cook.

"Yes; and I lived two miles below the road that leads from Memphis to Batesville."

"That must have been about the time when they hung Mitchell for killing his father—wasn't it?" said Curtis.

"Later," replied Atkins. "I came there four weeks after he was hung."

"The White river boys exercised stern justice," said Cook, laughing. "And the horse-thief—what was his name?—they strung him up, too."

"I can't blame them for it," cried Curtis; "no honest fellow should have compassion for a horse-thief—that is, if he has horses of his own—don't you think so, Atkins?"

"The justice of the matter, then, depends upon whether a man has horses or no," replied the latter, evading the question; "but—you must be hungry, I am sure? I will—"

"Thank you! thank you!" cried Curtis, detaining him, "we have eaten a hearty dinner and can easily wait till supper time. Stand upon no ceremony with us—but—is the child better?"

"No, alas! and it can scarcely be expected. It always seems to me bad enough when a sick person falls into the hands of one doctor, but there are eleven across yonder—though I have such confidence in my child's constitution, that I believe they can't kill it; otherwise it would have been dead long ago. But I'll fetch a light; it's getting dark. Thunder! how the wind whistles outside; we have had a remarkably stormy spring this year."

With these words he left the chamber, and the two Regulators found themselves the sole occupants of the apartment.

"Hark ye, Curtis," said Cook, after a short pause, "I'm sorry for Atkins—I'm sorry that he's one of the scoundrels."

"Speak lower," said the latter; "who the d—l knows if there isn't some one listening above us—yes, and I'm sorry, too. In all other respects he's a good, clever fellow, and I always liked him well enough. It's true he has rather a bad look out of the eyes, but that probably comes from often peeping around the corner."

"I wonder what they'll do with him," continued Cook, thoughtfully; "I hope they won't hang him. Hark ye, Curtis! I shouldn't like to have his death on my conscience. He deserves to be punished, and I see very well that we must put a stop to these doings, but to hang him—no—no—if it were only for his wife and child's sake!"

"That would be a fine excuse!" cried Curtis, laughing. "All that the rascals would have to do would be to marry, and then they might laugh at the rope. That shouldn't stand in the way; still, I am sorry for him. No, we won't hang him, only—"

"Hush, he's coming!" said Curtis, interrupting him; and their unsuspecting host entered the chamber with a candle made of wax and deer's tallow, placed it upon the table and lighted it with a pine chip.

"It whistles away outside as if it would tear away the roof above our heads," he said, raking the coals a little on the hearth. "If the wind don't divide and scatter it we shall have the storm upon us in ten minutes."

"It's bad for those who are out this evening," said Curtis; "toward night the cattle crowded remarkably about the house."

"Were there many people from the Petit-Jean present at the meeting?" inquired Atkins.

"Not many," replied Cook. "They are to have a meeting near home to-morrow morning. But there was a stranger there, seeking for stolen horses—"

"A half-breed," rejoined Atkins. "Yes, he stopped here and made inquiries, but, unfortunately, I could give him no information."

"You have seen nothing of his cattle, then?" said Cook, fixing a keen glance upon him.

"No—how should I?" replied Atkins, in astonishment; "I haven't been beyond my fences for the last two weeks, and the horse-thieves don't usually drive their stolen beasts in front of a man's house."

"Hardly," said Curtis, smiling. "But what's the matter with the dogs?—they make a terrible clatter."

"Perhaps it's one of the Regulators, obliged to stop on account of the storm that's coming on," said Cook.

"Probably," replied Atkins; "I'll see. Be quiet there, dogs! be quiet!"

With these words he stepped from the door, and Curtis whispered to Cook:

"That's Stevenson, mark me! but he has chosen a bad time; we must let the storm pass over first, at any rate. By Heavens! the fellows in the cane-brake will have a sweet time of it when the storm once begins; we are the best off here."

How far is it to the La Fave?" cried a voice without, which sounded above the furious barking of the dogs.

"The d—l!" muttered Atkins, as he sprang down the steps and ran toward the fence; "it's mighty soon for the second lot—Jones told me it would be a week before—"

"It flows close by," he then said aloud, in reply to the man, who, wrapped in a wide cloak, remained seated upon his horse. "Who are you, sir? My name is Atkins."

"Have you good pasturage here?" was the low answer.

"Where do you come from?" whispered Atkins. "Speak!"

"I beg you for a drink of water."

"The d—l! Jones told me it would be a week—"

"Have the horses conveyed quickly to a safe place," said the stranger, in a whisper. "I have left my boy with them, and a terrible storm is coming on."

"It won't hurt them to get wet," replied Atkins; "I have strangers in the house, and I can't leave it now."

"But the rain would wash away the tracks so nicely," remarked the other.

"True, that's a fact—but—how many are there?"

"Three."

"Only three! Jones spoke of seven."

"The others will come to-morrow evening—we didn't want to make the trail too broad."

"Is that the lad I am to keep here, to carry the beasts further?"

"The lad! why—yes—he knows all about it."

"But does he know the way to the Mississippi?"

"We have just come," replied the old man, forgetting himself, but, fortunately, he remarked his mistake in time, and after a short fit of coughing, continued: "We have just come from the West, it is true, but the lad has often been in that quarter. But, be quick—the big drops are beginning to fall already."

"Good! Only wait then for a moment, and I will tell the men within that you insist upon seeing after your horse yourself, or something of that sort. Holloa! who is that there?"

A man approached the fence, but was at once recognized as Weston.

"Oh, you've come just in time, Weston," cried Atkins; "here is a stranger with horses—go with them around behind the house, and get them under cover, and then come in. I can't well leave the two Regulators alone."

"Regulators! have you Regulators in your house?" asked the horseman, apparently much alarmed.

"They are guests; they are only passing the night here," said Atkins, in a tone of encouragement; "but you must really wait until the storm is over—in less than ten minutes it will pour terribly. If the horses are standing in the brook, there'll be no harm done; they'll leave no tracks there."

"In the brook?" said the stranger; "they ain't standing in the brook; I left them at the corner of the field."

"Hal confound you! why didn't you take them to the old place?"

"It's the first time I ever was here."

"Then we must have them in at once," cried Atkins, angrily; "I shouldn't like any horse-tracks to be found up at the fence-corner in the morning; the half-breed is still in the neighborhood. Do you, Weston, go with him as far as the fence; I'll first step into the house a minute, and return at once."

"Excuse me, gentlemen!" he said to the two Regulators, as he entered the chamber again, and drew to the door; "a stranger has come, who seems to be very peculiar, and insists upon seeing after his horse himself; he will be in in a moment.—But, hallo! here comes the storm. Well, that does pretty well—that flash was enough to blind a man. I can scarcely find my eyesight again."

"It's singular how light it makes everything," cried Curtis, looking out of a small window; "at such a flash one can see over the whole fields at a glance."

"Won't you sit by the fire, gentlemen?" said Atkins, with evident disquietude; "it's safer here and more comfortable."

"Why not?" responded Cook, bringing forward a stool, upon which he sat down, and placed his feet before the fire. "Come, Curtis, let the storm rage, and thank Heaven that your own skin is dry."

"I am thankful for it," answered Curtis, laughing, as he took a flask from his pocket; "and, that you may see that I know how to prize the advantage, we will at once drink to—good heavens, what a clap!—to the fright! Where are you going, Atkins?"

"I must go over to my wife for a moment—the women will be afraid if they are left alone. I'll be back soon."

He glided from the door, closed it, after him, and for several seconds the Regulators remained speechless and motionless upon their seats. Presently, however, Cook rose, and said in a whisper:

"Curtis, my heart begins to beat uncommonly. What a night this is! the flashes smell plainly of sulphur. Well, the boys in the cane-brake will be nicely soaked."

"It can't be helped," replied Curtis, casting a keen glance around the chamber. "So, then—there are two rifles—one over each door; that's prudent. We had best render them harmless; we sha'n't want to use them, and, that Atkins may do no mischief with the weapons," he continued, mounting upon a chair, and taking down first one and then the other, "I think we will blow away a little of this powder from the pan—so—both loaded—whew!—there is dust on this one. Are there any other weapons?"

"I see none," answered Cook, seeking around in the chamber, "unless he has concealed them."

"Examine the bed—under—is there none there?"

"No—I feel nothing—but—yes, here—by my soul, two pistols! Not so bad—right handy in case of need. Well, wait, rogue, we'll spoil your sport—so—now you are fixed. Now, I should like to see which of these four shooting-irons will go off first."

"Be particular with the pistols; a single grain will sometimes—"

"I have spit a little tobacco-juice into the pans; if he should snap the triggers till morning, neither of them would go off."

"I shouldn't wonder if the storm were to tear the roof from the house. Did you hear that tree fall? I begin to feel uncomfortable; I wish we had waited for a quieter time."

"My heart beats like a smith's hammer," said Cook, pacing the chamber, rapidly; "we sha'n't be able to hear the signal in this storm."

"That's of no consequence—we can't leave our posts; but, I wish I could see something—it's so unpleasant to grope around in darkness and uncertainty, when a man knows that a lot of stout fellows are lying in ambush, and waiting for their prey. You feel just as you do when you are crouching in the wood, and you hear something rustling in the bushes, and you don't know either where or what it is."

"Or in a big cave with a pine-torch, and you hear a bear growl, and can't find out on which side he is hid. I—that must have struck—lightning and thunder almost at the same instant—I was once in—"

"Do you hear nothing?"

"No; what do you expect a man to hear in such a storm? I am sorry for poor Stevenson and his son. Well, they won't forget Arkansas."

"Is the Canadian with the men in the cane-brake, or have they posted him in the wood?"

"No, no! he is with those who are to make the attack, and a stout fellow he is too. Hark! what was that?"

"I heard nothing. What will the women yonder say to it?"

"I am sorry that the child happens to be sick to-night."

"Yes, but there's no help for it. By Heaven, that was the whistle! Now, Cook, watch sharp—the dance begins."

"Come, be quick!" whispered Atkins to Stevenson and Weston, who were waiting for him without, near the fence. "When we have once got them under cover, it will be all the better, for the storm will wash away every track. But I declare it's too bad to be out in such a rain. Jones told me that you wouldn't come before a week."

"Oh, spare your words until we are under shelter," grumbled the old man, affecting a surly mood; "is this weather for conversation? All I have to do is to deliver over the beasts, and I wish to Satan I had left the business to another, for it's enough to give a man his death to hold his back to such a storm!"

"Where are the horses?"

"Somewhere up yonder, near the fence. My boy is with them; that is, if the poor fellow isn't washed away." With these words he thrust his fingers between his teeth, and gave a low but sharp whistle.

"What the deuce are you about?" cried Atkins, in alarm.

"Do you hear? he answers," said the old man; "he's alive yet. Where is the entrance?"

"Just above—you are not far from it. But, when you come again, turn off about a hundred paces further up, and ride into the brook. Do you see yonder?"

"See! see now—in such weather? Not the hand before my face, except when it lightens. But here is the boy. Heh, Ned, come here! Are you alive yet?"

"Yes, father," replied the young man in a whisper; "but it's a terrible storm—I'm almost afraid."

"Nonsense! you'll soon be dry again. Have the beasts kept quiet?"

"So, so—only the black horse shied a little at the lightning."

"That's natural; what beast would you expect to stand quiet?—But what are you doing?" he asked, turning to Atkins; "are you taking the fence down?"

"Yes," replied Atkins; "I took good care not to make a gate up here. I placed the feeding-troughs in the corner. There are too many spies in the neighborhood, and the least thing unusual would excite suspicion. So—come in—take care! here are some felled trees. Ah! that flash came at the right time."

"Is the place where you hide the horses far from here?"

"Not a hundred paces distant. Well, that was a clap! Let the fence lie till we return; none of my horses will escape now; they are all standing under the shed. So, come on; this is the place."

At this moment a dazzling flash again illuminated surrounding objects, and Stevenson saw that they were standing near a fence, which was overhung with cane that grew on the other side.

"Wait a minute," said Atkins, quickly; "just let me push back the bars, and remove this log—that will give us room. So, now—lead down the beasts; no one will look for them there; and then into the house—a hot drink—fire and brimstone! what are you about? Treachery!"

And he had good reason for the exclamation; for scarcely was the entrance to the secret hiding-place opened, when Stevenson uttered a loud, shrill whistle. The next moment a dazzling flash illuminated the place as with the light of day. As Atkins, half-blinded by the glare, looked about him, he beheld several dark forms rush toward the spot; and while the thunder rolled, crashing and rattling along the firmament, he felt the hand of the vigorous Tennesseean upon his collar.

But well acquainted as he was with the localities of the place, the darkness proved of great advantage to him. Like an eel he glided away beneath the threatening hand, and, in-

stead of Atkins, Stevenson grasped his son, who had likewise leaped forward to seize the culprit. A second flash, however, betrayed the flying form of Atkins; and Weston also, who had been almost paralyzed by the first surprise, was seen running toward the spot where they had entered the inclosure.

This place, however, was guarded; and he had almost run into the hands of two men who were posted there, when another flash warned him of his danger. He turned swiftly, and endeavored to escape over the fence. But here also he heard steps and whispers; and now convinced that this was no accidental discovery, but a concerted plan of surprise, he beheld every avenue of flight cut off, and the only hope which remained to him was that he might escape through the porch, or between the house and the smoke-house, a narrow space which was almost always occupied by the dogs, and hence gain the wood, and with it at least temporary safety.

At the moment that he leaped into the porch, however, and was about to pass between the two buildings, he heard the sound of furious wrestling and cursing in the chamber to his right, in front the loud voices of approaching enemies, behind him his pursuers; and, in the anguish of despair, he rushed into the chamber of the women, who, with a cry of terror, partly at the suddenness of his entrance, partly at the fearful aspect of the young man, started suddenly from their seats.

CHAPTER VI.

"My dear Mrs. Mullins, will you be so good as to pour me out another cup of coffee?" said widow Fuller, as she took the moaning child from its cradle, and walked with it up and down the chamber. "How its little head burns!" she then cried, holding the child so near the light, that its feverish face was painfully distorted, and it was about to renew its cries.

"Hush, baby, hush! don't cry! What lungs the child has got! and this is the third dose of calomel we have given it this blessed day. Hush, baby, hush!"

"Yes," replied the elder Miss Hicks, while she filled the stump of a tobacco-pipe with glowing ashes, inhaling the smoke between her words to kindle the fragrant weed; "yes—the little creature—has—lamed all our arms to-day—poor thing!—the—"

"Have you any tobacco left, Miss Hicks?" asked Mrs. Fuller, as she stepped to the chimney and drew a similar pipe from a crevice between the cross-beams. "I have only smoked two to-day. Mrs. Mullins, won't you take the child a little while?"

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Mullins. "But, good heavens, how it cries! Won't you drink a cup of tea, Mrs. Atkins? it will do you good."

"No, I thank you," returned the latter, approaching the child, and placing her ice-cold hand upon its hot brow. "Alas! alas! it's getting worse; it will die—it can not live till morning!"

"Oh, no, there is no such danger, I'm sure!" said Mrs. Smith, endeavoring to console her. "Don't think that, Mrs. Atkins. I've seen children much sicker than this. Mrs. Preston's baby had dark-purple spots on its little cheeks much worse than yours, and it coughed harder, a great deal harder, and still it lived—five days."

"But it died!" said the mother, anxiously.

"Yes, alas! we did what we could for the poor creature; Mrs. Fuller there knows it. We gave it red pepper tea, until it couldn't keep it down—the poor little thing; and the mustard-plaster on its back drew and drew, until its little skin was red as fire, but for all that it died."

"And what an angel of a child it was," interposed Mrs. Fuller, who had by this time got her pipe lighted, and had taken the infant in her arms again—"a real cherub; it took down the calomel and oil as if it had been syrup; and it died so easy—it was a pleasure to see it."

"Mrs. Stewart's baby was a sweet little thing too before it died," said Mrs. Smith; "it had just such a cough as yours, Mrs. Atkins; it's strange how quick it comes—in the morning it was well and hearty, and in the evening it was cold and dead—the poor dear!"

"What are these blue spots on the child's neck?" said Mrs. Bowitt, bending down over the little sufferer.

"Where? where?" cried the terrified mother; "what is the meaning of those blue spots?"

Are they dangerous? Ah, me, my child is dying!"

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Fuller; "blue spots! I should like to know where there are any blue spots? What does Mrs. Bowitt know of children's complaints? The third that she lost was hardly six months old, and all of them weren't sick a week."

"A strange doctor once told me that the blue spots were a very bad sign," said the younger Miss Hicks. "Brother George's child had them, and it came very near dying that night—but it lived till morning."

"Has the child actually blue spots?" cried Mrs. Atkins, in deathlike anguish; "is it so far gone, and must it really die?"

"Oh, Heaven, help us!" cried Mrs. Hopper; "it isn't in such great danger; the blue spots are nothing, if it only didn't squeak so when it coughs. My poor little girl that died last month coughed just so."

The disconsolate mother sunk upon the bed, and wrung her hands in despair.

"Ladies," began Mrs. Cowles, who until now had been smoking her pipe, as she knocked out the ashes upon the hearth, "I don't see why you should worry poor Mrs. Atkins so. Lord bless us, what a flash! it struck all my nerves—neither blue spots, nor coughing, nor squeaking, nor any such nonsense—"

Here she was obliged to stop, for the rolling thunder drowned, for a moment, even the crying of the child—"are sure signs," she continued, as soon as she could be heard, "of death! I know of two cases myself where the children both got well—that is, one was left blind, and the other bitten by a mad dog, but the spots had nothing to do with that. Why worry, Mrs. Atkins, when there's no danger?"

"You think then that my child will recover?"

"Why shouldn't it? It's taken enough medicine to make six children well—and if it only didn't look so yellow in the eyes—"

"Yellow in the eyes!" cried the anxious mother anew, darting toward the child with the light, "and what does that mean? Mrs. Fuller, you are a woman of experience—do you think that—" She did not conclude the sentence, but concealed her face in her hands, and said softly—"I have deserved it—deserved it for my treatment of Ellen—deserved it for my conniving—" She started up in terror, and looked around to see if any one had heard the treacherous words, then relapsed again into her former state of anxiety.

That fearful clap of thunder, which had already been twice referred to, now rolled over the tops of the groaning, trembling forest, and at the presence of the angry God of storms, the women crowded more closely together. Deathlike stillness prevailed for several seconds; then the younger Miss Hicks said in a whisper to Mrs. Mullins, who sat next to her:

"It was just such weather when Houston's first child died—just such thunder."

"It's a long time since we have had such a storm," sighed Mrs. Fuller, lighting her pipe for the fourth time; "it's enough to frighten folks in the house. And think of those who are out!"

"What did your youngest child really die of, Mrs. Mullins?" asked the elder Miss Hicks, hitching her stool toward the former. "In our part of the settlement they said it was the small-pox, and we were all quite frightened, as you can easily believe."

"The Lord bless you, my dear Miss Hicks! the small-pox! Well, what nonsense people will talk—the small-pox! no, no! the sweet darling had nothing but a slight dysentery, and I can't now think how it could have got it. The whole season it had eaten nothing but a few green peaches and plums, such as all children eat in summer, and I'm sure that couldn't have brought it on. But what's the matter?"

Mrs. Atkins had started up, and was listening attentively at the window.

"What was it? did you see anything?" asked the speaker, in alarm.

"No—nothing—but—didn't you hear a whistle in the field?"

"Yes, I thought I did," said Mrs. Mullins; "but it storms so, a body can hear nothing."

"Didn't you hear some one call without?" asked Mrs. Atkins, who, pale and terrified, was holding her ear to the crevices of the hut.

"Lord, help me!" cried Mrs. Fuller, "who would be out in such weather!—but—gracious Heaven!"

This exclamation was called forth by no de-

lusion of the imagination, and all the women started in affright from their seats, for the door of the apartment was suddenly thrown open, and young Weston rushed in with alarm and horror in his features, his wet hair fluttering about his forehead, and his eyes glaring wildly, while he cried in a voice choked with terror:—

"Hide me, or I am lost!" Then, half unconsciously, but with sure instinct, selecting the safest and most retired part of the chamber, he darted behind the bed, which almost filled one corner of the little apartment.

"For Heaven's sake! Weston, what has happened?" cried Mrs. Atkins, in deathlike anguish. But the young man had no time to reply, for at this moment the dark form of the half-breed rushed in at the open door, and he cried in a harsh voice:

"He must be here!—where is he?"

"Where is *who*?" said Mrs. Fuller, who, somewhat acquainted with Cotton's and Weston's secrets, had an instinctive idea of what was passing, and therefore was the first to recover her presence of mind—"where is *who*? Is this a way to enter other people's houses, and particularly a chamber where there are ladies and a sick child? Where is *who*? Why do you stand gaping there? The wind is blowing the light out—the men are in the other house." And without waiting for the confused and astounded Canadian to reply, she pushed him from the door, and closed it in his face.

"Sol!" she said, as she drew to a little iron bolt, decidedly an article of luxury in Arkansas; "now let us take a look at our prisoner."

In the meanwhile, however, the other women, with the exception of Mrs. Atkins, had recovered their senses and their tongues, and such a storm of exclamations and questions now arose, that the sick child lifted its head in affright from the cradle, into which, at first burst of confusion, it had been hastily laid, and now, fairly out-screamed, was silent for a moment; then, however, it threw itself back upon the pillow, and set up such a shrieking that Mrs. Fuller prayed to Heaven that the indefatigable child might in some way or other be silenced.

"What has happened? Who is the man? What has he done? What dark form was that? Where could the drenched man have come from all at once? Should they hide him? Wouldn't others come in search of him?" These and similar exclamations were uttered with such rapidity, such a Babel-like confusion of sounds that the women were unable to answer the questions uttered by themselves. A hand was now laid upon the latch, and some one without knocked at the door.

"Ladies, will you permit me to ask a question?" said a voice, which Mrs. Atkins, to her great alarm, recognized as Brown's. "Has a young man taken refuge in this chamber?"

Before answering, Mrs. Fuller looked around at her companions, whose hearts compassion had already softened in Weston's favor, and who were resolved not to deliver him up to his enemies, whatever crime he might have committed, and equally resolved to find out what the crime might be. A universal shake of the head replied to this glance, and as spokeswoman of the assembly, widow Fuller, that she might not utter a downright falsehood, considered it advisable to evade the question, and, above all things, to assume an air of offended dignity. Raising, therefore, her somewhat sharp and piercing voice, she cried, in a tone of indignation:

"Well! I wonder what they'll look for here next? This is no time of night, nor is this the kind of weather, to listen to such foolery. We are going to bed, and don't wish to be disturbed. Good-night, sir!"

With this the negotiations were broken off, and the questioner seemed satisfied; at least, he made no attempt to push his inquiries further, and left the door. For several minutes, Mrs. Fuller and her companions listened with throbbing hearts; but not a sound was heard. All was still and quiet as the grave, and the widow was about to walk on tiptoe toward the fugitive, who had cowered, motionless, behind the bed, when her attention, as well as that of the other women, was turned to Mrs. Atkins. She had grasped convulsively the back of her chair, and was evidently making the greatest exertions to bear up against the emotions which assailed her; after a short struggle, however, consciousness deserted her, and she would have fallen to the floor, if the women had not caught her in their arms.

In the meanwhile, a scene not less agitating and tumultuous was passing in the other house. Scarcely had Cook uttered his warning call to his friend, when a step was heard upon the deal floor, in the porch which joined the two dwellings, and the next moment, Atkins, his eyes flashing wildly, and his hair in disorder, rushed into the apartment. He was convinced that Curtis and Cook were in the plot, but he knew also, that in the forest, without weapons, he was inevitably lost, and he was forced to procure them even at the hazard of his life. Thinking, therefore, to take advantage of their surprise at his sudden entrance, he tore open the door, and darted into the chamber. Here he saw, at a glance, that his rifles were in the hands of the enemy; the bed, however, seemed untouched, and with a shout of triumph he rushed toward it, drew forth the pistols, and advanced to the door, aiming one of the weapons at Cook who barred the passage, yet apparently only to frighten him, and force his way from the house. The latter, however calmly maintained his position, and Atkins, resolute to sacrifice the life of another to save his own, drew upon the trigger, but no report followed.

Atkins looked wildly toward the door by which he had entered; but at the same moment his pursuers rushed in, while Cook and Curtis threw themselves upon him, and bound him with strong ropes.

"Where is the other?" inquired Brown, closing the door. "Does no one know?"

"He darted into the opposite house," replied the Canadian. "I saw it with my own eyes, but they won't give him up."

"I will try whether they will refuse me entrance," said the leader of the Regulators, and he advanced toward the opposite door.

The reader is acquainted with the result of his attempt, however; and, without losing further time and trouble, he at once resolved upon the surest method to seize the fugitive, at least as soon as he should try to escape into the forest, which, at all events, he would be forced to do before daylight.

"Gentlemen," he said, returning to his companions, "the fellow must not escape us. He belongs to the band, of course; and who knows if he was not one of the murderers, or at least implicated in the thefts which have been so frequently committed in our midst? We must surround the house, therefore; but let it be done without noise, that he may think the coast is clear. Has the mulatto been secured?"

"No," replied Bowitt; "the rascal must have slipped through the thickest of the wood, otherwise he couldn't have escaped us."

"That's bad! that's bad!" muttered Brown; "he will warn the others; but there's no help for it. We have broken up the nest of these scoundrels—we have found out their hiding-place; for the rest we must trust to fortune. So, then, gentlemen, to your posts! The rain has stopped, and the wind will soon dry us. Take the prisoner to the fire, Cook; he, too, is wet."

"Good!" said Cook, who, aided by Curtis, carried Atkins to the fire. "But we two are dry; we will join you without, and let Stevenson and his son guard the prisoner by the fire here. We are so greatly indebted to them that I should be sorry to have them suffer for it."

"Very well," replied Brown; "it is but just. Where can they be?"

The two Stevensons now entered, and were at once assigned to their new and more comfortable, or at least dryer duty. The rest immediately repaired to their posts; and Brown, who had longed to speak a few words in a low tone with the elder Stevenson, had turned to follow them, when he started almost in terror from the door; for upon the threshold, his flying hair dripping with rain, his glance flashing wildly, his bearing proud and gloomy, stood—the Indian!

"Assowaum!" exclaimed Brown, in joyful surprise, "have you come at last? We have been busy for you in the meanwhile."

"Ah weeh! why do you seize him?" asked the Indian, pointing toward Atkins with his hand, in which he held a bow and several arrows.

"He was an accomplice of the band but you shall hear all to-morrow. Have you just returned?"

"No—I have a prisoner."

"Whom, and where?"

"Johnson—out in the wood."

"Do you know that he is guilty?"

"He knew that a panther was upon his track, and he feared his claws. Do you know these weapons? The arrows are poisoned! He crept with them to Assowaum's couch, and would have slain him."

"The villain! But you have bound him, I suppose? Can't he escape?"

"Assowaum's hands are strong."

"But where have you been so long? There were some here who maintained that you had fled."

"My brother was not among them," replied the savage. "Does he think that Assowaum has been idle since he left the La Fave? Assowaum knows the murderers of Heathcote!"

"You know them? Who are they? Speak!" exclaimed Brown, in eager emotion.

"Johnson and—Rawson!" replied the Indian, in a low tone.

"Rawson! Almighty Heaven! it is impossible!" cried Brown, in terror; "that is—that would be frightful! Rawson a murderer!"

"Johnson and Rawson," repeated Assowaum, in the same calm but decided tone. "The pale man took part also in the horse-stealing."

"Man, are you sure of this?" asked Brown, still unable to grasp the fearful thought that Marion was in the hands of a villain. "Have you proofs of this terrible charge?"

"The pale man took part in the horse-stealing; and his foot stood near the blood of the white man."

"Just Heaven! Assowaum, do you know whom you accuse?"

"The preacher!" answered the Indian, gloomily. "Perhaps, also, he trod down the 'Flower of the Prairies'—yet, until now, Assowaum has hovered around her grave in vain. But he slew the white man; Assowaum has known it for four days."

"And why were you silent?"

"If the white men found the criminal guilty of murder," replied Assowaum, with a wild and almost spectral smile, "they would hang him, and Assowaum would have seen his own vengeance in the hands of others. Assowaum—ah weeh!—Assowaum is a red-man; he will avenge himself!"

"But where is your prisoner?"

"Out in the wood. He thought to find a chief asleep. Has my brother ever seen a panther shut his eyes?"

"Then we will—but what is that? This is the third time that I have heard that cry of the owl, and each time in a different direction. Can it be a signal?"

The Indian listened. Again the gloomy, monotonous call echoed upon their ears—three times, at long, measured intervals; and three times in the same measure the red son of the forest answered it. But all was now silent in the thicket, and the cry was not heard again.

"It was an owl," said Brown, listening out into the quiet night.

"Perhaps," replied the Indian, thoughtfully, "perhaps not. That man knows the signal."

Atkins, to whom these words referred, had, during this while, cast anxious and stolen glances at the door, and when Assowaum answered the call, started up as if in alarm; but now, when all was silent and the Indian's signal was not returned, a scornful, insolent smile passed across his dark features, and without evincing further tokens of interest in the scene, he cowered again near the warm fire. He refused to answer the questions which Brown put to him, and contemptuously turned his back to him as well as to the man who had first entrapped him, and who now guarded him.

In the meanwhile, the Indian, accompanied by several of the Regulators, had left the house, and deep silence prevailed for at least half an hour when suddenly a wild shriek was heard, apparently proceeding from the back part of the fence, where it touched the wood. In a moment, Wilson and Hatfield brought in Weston, who had been caught in attempting to escape into the woods.

Soon after Assowaum reappeared with two of the Regulators, leading Johnson with pallid face and downcast eyes. They pushed him into the chamber, where he suddenly found himself in the presence of his bitterest enemy, Hatfield.

"So, then, sir!" cried the latter, gazing at him from head to foot in astonishment, "you belong to the band, and are, as it seems, in quite a pleasant condition!—Who caught the fellow?"

"The Indian," replied Cook, pointing to the savage.

"Ha, Assowaum!" cried Hatfield, now first recognizing him. "I am glad to see you here again, and particularly as you have brought us such proofs of your good-will. Confound me, Assowaum, if I know what return I can make you for it; five hundred dollars wouldn't be more welcome to me. But here, here is my rifle; it's inlaid with silver. I know yours is almost worn out; it's always flashing in the pan, and you have long wished for a new weapon. Take it, and may it do you as good service as it has done me!—And you, fellow," he continued, turning to the trembling criminal, "you shan't escape punishment this time. When we last met, you were mighty insolent; now the tables have turned a little. See how the knave shakes and trembles! his legs can hardly support him."

"Fire and fury!" cried the fettered prisoner, raising his head for the first time, with an air of defiance; "you can bind me and—lynch me—to the d—l with you! but you needn't mock me. Twenty to fall upon one man!"

Hatfield's eyes flashed fire, and he seemed about to inflict summary chastisement upon the offender, but Brown prevented him and said:

"Leave him in peace; let his tongue wag, if that will ease him any. We have a right to keep him a prisoner, at all events, if for no other reason than that he lay in wait for the Indian, and would have murdered him. That is the first charge; the others will follow. As soon as we have laid hands upon his comrades, the court—our court, that is—will settle the rest. The most important thing for us now to do, is, to find out the place where these rascals harbor. Who knows the way?"

"I!" replied Assowaum. "But does my brother believe that the bear returns to his den when he scents the track of the hunter at the entrance? When the owl cried, it was for the man who lives here. Assowaum did not know how to answer it, and they were warned; the den is empty."

"You may be right, Assowaum," rejoined Brown, "but we must make the trial; and then our next task must be to find—the second whom you think guilty. Heaven be praised! it is still time, but I cannot imagine it possible—it is too frightful!"

"Who is this other man of whom the Indian speaks?" inquired Stevenson.

"You shall know presently," replied the young Regulator, gazing darkly upon the ground. "But—Mr. Stevenson," he then added, as if waking from a dream, "you will remain with us, I hope, until this business is ended? You must see how we exercise law and justice here in Arkansas."

"I shall remain, of course," said the old man, replying with a hearty pressure to the clasp of Brown's offered hand.

"But then your women must consider my house as their own, as long as you are here," said Hopper. "Your camp, Cook tells me, is hardly a quarter of a mile from my house; and as I must return home early to-morrow morning, I will bring them over myself. When do we hold our court?"

"On Monday morning."

"And where?"

"For this time, in the woods near Gower's mill, where the steep rock projects into the river. Upon its summit there is a fine open place, and we will transport the prisoners thither."

"Whom do you seek yet?" asked Hatfield.

"Cotton and—Rawson."

"Rawson! the preacher! the Methodist?" exclaimed all, in the utmost astonishment.

"The preacher, the Methodist," replied Brown, in a low voice.

"And who is his accuser?" inquired Mullins, in dismay.

"Assowaum!" replied the leader of the Regulators, pointing to the Indian who was leaning quietly against the chimney; and whose eyelids did not wink as he encountered the incredulous glances that were directed toward him.

"He has blood upon his hands," he said, at last, after a short pause; "he has blood in his tracks; and the water of the Petit-Jean, the water of the La Fave could not wash it out."

"And to-morrow he is to marry old Roberts's daughter!" cried Cook, in astonishment. "It isn't possible; the Indian must be mistaken."

"The pious Rawson!" groaned forth Mullins, in horror, but still in a tone of incredulity.

"Words are useless here—we must act," said Brown, quickly forming his resolution. "If a shadow of suspicion rests upon the preacher his good name requires that it should be cleared up as soon as possible, for no stain should rest upon his sacred vocation. But, first of all, we must try to seize the criminals who dwell in the neighborhood, and who are probably warned. Let Assowaum lead us to Johnson's house, and thence we will set out together for Roberts's dwelling, which we can reach by early morning."

"I'm sure there is some mistake here," said Mullins; "the Indian is but a man."

"Assowaum has followed the tracks for weeks; he has measured and compared them," replied the savage, darkly. "So true as this storm shakes the old trunks, the pale man is a murderer!"

"Of what use are words?" inquired Brown. "He is accused; and—"

"But by whom?" cried Mullins, angrily interrupting him. "The Indian—but he was never friendly to him, because he converted Alapaha to Christianity. Shall we upon his bare word, seize a pious, God-fearing man, and insult and degrade him? That must never be. Bring proofs first, before I will give my consent to such an unjustifiable deed."

"Place him face to face with Assowaum," said the Indian, rising proudly from his posture of repose—"place him face to face with Assowaum, and if his eye can look steadfastly on mine, then hang me to a tree! Are the men satisfied?"

"We are," replied Hatfield, earnestly. "I do not see why we should give more credit to the testimony of a white man than to that of a red one. I could never bear the preacher, and I shouldn't wonder if he turned out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, after all. He, like every one else, is but a man; and that he is a preacher, gives him no particular merit, at least not in my eyes. If he can clear himself before the tribunal, so much the better for him; but I almost fear that the Indian is too sure of his business, for his manner is not that of a man who acts on bare suspicion. Lead the way, Brown!—every moment that we lose is precious. Lead the way: the guilty shall meet with their reward!"

"And what is to be done with these prisoners?" asked Cook, pointing to Atkins, Weston, and Johnson.

"It will be best to remove them this very night," answered Brown. "The house is full of women; Mrs. Atkins, therefore, has enough here to assist her. But where shall we take them?"

"To my house," replied Wilson. "Curseless, I am sure, will not refuse admission to the Regulators and their prisoners; and all we have then to do is to set a safe guard over them."

"I'll keep watch," cried Curtis, "and I shall find comrades enough to help me; and then, my rifle is warrant that they won't escape. But, now, let us set out. It can't be far from morning; and, if Cotton is really warned, it will be a hard task to capture him. Everybody's dogs are at his heels. Let one party set off with the prisoners, and the other proceed to business."

The necessary preparations for this course were made quickly and noiselessly, that they might not needlessly disturb the women. After a quarter of an hour had passed, the three captives, escorted by six well-armed men, were on the way to their temporary prison. Pelter and Hopper remained as guards in Atkins's house; and the rest, guided by Assowaum, set out for the solitary hut of the accomplices, to seize the man of whom they had so long been in search, or to obtain new proofs of the guilt of those already in their power.

Midnight lay upon the forest. The mighty tree-tops still rustled and rocked, and shook the cold rain from their green, waving leaves; faint lightnings still gleamed above the eastern horizon, and distant thunder muttered and rolled from afar, when a dark form stepped quickly and cautiously across the fence which inclosed Johnson's little hut. It was Cotton. He glided through the open door into the dwelling; hastily collected all that he possessed in clothing and in weapons; concealed several other things, which he wished probably to hide from the eyes of his enemies, in a hollow tree, that stood not far from the hut; then, lighting a fire upon the hearth, he raked it into a corner of the chamber beneath the bed, cast a hasty,

farewell glance upon the spot which had so long afforded him shelter against his pursuers, muttered a bitter curse between his thin, pale lips, and then disappeared as he had come, quickly and noiselessly, in the dense, impenetrable gloom of the forest.

CHAPTER VII.

THE "Cross-Oak" was a place well known to the hunters of the La Fave. It stood not far from the banks of a small pond, on the edge of one of the many "slues," or swamp-brooks, that intersected the bottom-land, near a dense cane-brake, which, set on fire during the preceding year, probably by the negligence of some hunters, now offered a desolate picture of scorched and half-burned canes, through which the young, green stems were just beginning to force their way in single, scattered places.

The bough of a tall persimmon-tree, whose top had been riven by the lightning, had fallen between the forked branches of a neighboring oak, thus forming a cross, which, though rude in outline, was easily to be recognized.

Rawson, especially in earlier times, had often held camp-meetings here, and, as well as Cotton, was accurately acquainted with the spot, in the vicinity of which a great number of deer were to be found, and now and then a stray bear. The hunter had reached the place about an hour before the time appointed by Rawson, and was now walking rapidly and restlessly along the steep bank of the slue, occasionally casting impatient glances toward the quarter from which he expected his comrade to appear; while he listened shyly and cautiously, now on this side, now on that, as if he feared the sudden approach of danger.

A dry branch was now heard to crackle, and, like a serpent, the hunter glided behind a fallen tree, where he lay motionless as the wood that concealed him. Presently, however, he beheld his anxiously-expected comrade approach, and he started quickly from his hiding-place, and hastened to meet the new-comer.

"At last you have come!" he cried, moodily. "I have been suffering all the tortures of the d—l here for the last half-hour."

"You have no reason to find fault; I am here considerably before the time. It can hardly be more than half-past eight, and you know we were to meet here at nine."

"Yes, perhaps never to see each other again!"

"What has happened?" cried Rawson, in alarm, who now remarked the pale and agitated features of his comrade and associate. "You look as if you had lost a friend. Have the Regulators—"

"I wish, by Heaven! it was nothing more than the loss of a friend," replied the hunter, between his set teeth. "The infernal Regulators have, in some way, got wind of our secret, and have surprised Atkins's house."

"Thunder and lightning!" exclaimed Rawson, anxiously. "And has he confessed?"

"I hadn't the curiosity to inquire!" muttered Cotton. "Johnson, too, must have fallen into the hands of the accursed Indian; for he went out to dispatch him, and—didn't come back."

"But how do you know that Atkins—"

"Seeing that Johnson didn't return, I went out to look for him, but I found no signs of him; and then went over to Atkins's, to tell him of my fears. But there seemed to be a strange confusion about the farm. The horses were galloping, wild and shy, around the inclosure; and, gliding along the fence, until I came to the secret entrance, I found it open. This, of course, increased my suspicions; but I determined to try and approach the house, and I gave the signal several times."

"For a long while it wasn't answered, and at last answered wrong—only three times. I was now convinced that there was some treachery on foot. I lurked for a considerable time about the farm, and, notwithstanding all my care, had nearly fallen into the hands of the knaves, who had posted themselves on all sides; for as I was about to turn a corner of the fence, number of dark figures rushed from their ambushment, and threw themselves upon a single man, who, to judge from his voice, could have been no other than Weston. I at once took to my heels, as you may easily suppose. I ran back to Johnson's hut at full speed, concealed everything that was of value to us in the hollow gum-tree, which stands near the house, close by the river, took my weapons, and set

the nest on fire. My only hope then was to find you."

"But what shall we do?" asked Rawson, walking back and forth, in fearful agitation. "Suppose the prisoners should betray us? Where is Jones?"

"Probably in the hands of the Regulators," replied Cotton, grinding his teeth with fury; at least I think so now—otherwise he would have returned."

"We must fly, then," said Rawson; "there is no other way. There is still time."

"But how? They will pursue and overtake us."

"We can't of course, go on horseback," rejoined Rawson; "now that the yelping hounds are once awake—we should have them too soon upon our heels; and, after this rain, we should leave tracks behind us an inch deep. But my boat is the thing for us; the river is still pretty high, and, as there is nobody in Harper's house to-day, we can perhaps reach the Arkansas undiscovered. Afterward, we shall have no difficulty. By to-morrow morning we shall be at the mouth of the Bayou Meto; we will put in there, and then we are safe."

"But your bride—and mine? Ellen will grieve terribly," cried the rude hunter, with a laugh of mockery.

"It's too late to think of them," replied Rawson. "Thunder and lightning! to see such a morsel snapped away from a man's lips! But my neck is dearer to me; and I doubt if they would stand on much ceremony with us if we were once in their clutches. If we were to be delivered over to the courts, and regularly provided with lawyers, I would still say, 'Let us wait—it will be time for flight by-and-by;' but as it is, the d—l may trust the scoundrels' not, I!" Luckily, everything is ready; and as soon as we reach the house we can—But, confound it! I expect visitors; I had forgotten that."

"I must go alone, Cotton," he continued, turning to the latter. "Roberts's whole family, with Barker and Harper, are preparing to set out for my house. I must prevent it. I will invent a pretext on the way, by which I can persuade them to wait a while, and let me go on before them. If we can but gain a single hour's start, I fear nothing more, then we are safe. Make, therefore, with all speed for my house, for though I have first to go to Roberts's, yet I shall get there pretty nearly at the same time as you do, for my horse is good, and if he will but hold out to-day, he may break down when he will."

"But if I get there before you!" said Cotton; "for, believe me, I sha'n't stop on the way."

"Mount by the ladder to the upper part of the house; there stands the little chest, ready packed for such an occasion; it contains all that we shall need on our journey."

"And the signal?"

"You will see me come; the house commands a view for several hundred paces round of the little knoll on which it is built."

"But it isn't right to leave our comrades so in the lurch," said Cotton, thoughtfully. "Who knows but we could be of use to them, if we should remain here all night. There are many farmers hereabouts that wish us well, and are ready to lend us a helping hand; but how can we expect them to stir when we take to flight at the first alarm?"

"The d—l take your scruples!" cried Rawson, impatiently. "Do you think that I mean to interfere, when, perhaps, Weston and Johnson have already confessed, to save their own hides? Confound me, if I thrust my neck into the noose, merely to see how a couple of others that I can't help, have got into it. I shall be off—you can do as you please."

"But you don't know whether your name has been mentioned. You remember our oath?"

"Oh, yes—all of it, very well—but the d—l may trust to the oath, not I. It wouldn't be the first that a black hickory stick has broken; and didn't you say yourself that Johnson was afraid of being betrayed by that infernal red-skin? The same thing threatens me, only in a still worse degree. If the Indian hadn't shown himself again in this part of the country, perhaps I would have ventured it, and stayed. But I can't remain to be dogged forever by that vengeful, skulking rascal; therefore, I shall quit the field. Will you go with me or not?"

"Why, of course, I sha'n't leave my fingers in the broth alone," replied the hunter, gruffly.

"I find it comfortable enough here on God's earth, and I hav'n't the slightest thing to look for with my eyes staring out of my head, and my neck close under the branch of an oak. Let us start, then—but whither?"

"I am going to the island," said Rawson, resolutely; "where are you bound?"

"We shall have time enough to consider on the way," replied the hunter, evasively; "but first of all, let us quit this place; for any other, even the Arkansas penitentiary, is safer for us at this moment than the La Fave. But come soon, and don't keep me waiting long. I shall feel rather uncomfortable if I have to stay there for an hour. I should fear every moment to see the house surrounded by Regulators."

"Never fear; I'll be there soon enough. I hope the Roberts's hav'n't started yet, for their presence might be a serious inconvenience. I'll be with you as soon as my horse can carry me there. After all, I'm half glad that I can at last throw off the preacher's mask; for the last two weeks especially, it has been terribly wearisome."

"I only hope that the air of Arkansas may suit you better unmasked than masked," replied Cotton, as he drew from beneath a thick growth of green briars and creeping plants, a bundle of clothes, wrapped in a coarse blanket, and threw it across his shoulders—"So! now I am ready for the journey," he continued, casting around a shy side-glance; "follow soon. Good-by!"

"Good-by!" answered the preacher, as he gazed long and thoughtfully after him, until he had disappeared behind the thick papaw and cassafra bushes. Then he hastened to his horse, which stood grazing quietly, leaped into the saddle, plunged his spurs into the beast's flanks, and galloped as rapidly as the underbrush permitted further into the wood, toward Roberts's dwelling.

CHAPTER VIII.

BOTH Harper and Barker, but especially the former, had accepted Mrs. Roberts's invitation reluctantly, yet it had been given with such warmth and heartiness that they were unable to refuse, and they at once prepared to saddle and bridle their beasts, that they might not keep the party waiting.

It was with an air of restless anxiety, that Marion made the necessary preparations for a step which was henceforth to remove her from the house of her parents, and this emotion was so evidently imprinted upon her features, that even the rude and careless Barker remarked it, and spoke of it to Harper.

"Pshaw! nonsense," exclaimed the latter; "it's all your imagination."

Mrs. Roberts, who had a thousand things to prepare and pack, had gazed for a while with evident impatience at the dilatory proceedings of the men; at last, her accustomed restlessness, her desire to do and arrange everything with her own hands, gained the ascendancy, and, rising from her chair, she turned to Marion and Ellen, and said, as she took her daughter's bonnet from the nail on which it hung:

"Come, children, put on your hats and be gone; I am tired of this bustle; I have a heap of things to get together and take with me, that are indispensable to a well-regulated household, and that are seldom found in a bachelor's dwelling. In the meanwhile, as soon as Mr. Rawson returns, Sam will take the baskets upon his horse, and we three will follow you immediately. You can chat together there, as well as here, and we won't keep you waiting long."

Nothing could be said against this arrangement; even Harper made but a few feeble remonstrances, and soon the little cavalcade, headed by Roberts and Barker, set itself in motion. In the meanwhile, Mrs. Roberts bustled around with the greatest activity among jugs, and chests, and boxes, taking out a multitude of utensils, which she found herself obliged to return to their places, as it was impossible to transport them all to Marion's new abode. She had already unpacked the three baskets for the third time, to fill them anew, when, suddenly, the figure of the Indian appeared at the threshold; his eyes shone so earnestly and darkly, beneath his wildly waving hair, that the good dame actually uttered a slight cry of terror, or rather of surprise, and almost dropped from her hands an earthen vessel, which she had filled with dried peaches.

"Ah, Assowaum!" she said, at last, with a

smile, "you really startled me; you came so all of a sudden—so like a ghost; where have you kept yourself all this while?—how have you been?"

"Has the pale man led the brown-eyed maiden to his wigwam?" said the Indian, without heeding her friendly welcome, and glancing anxiously around the chamber. "Has Assowaum come too late?"

"What is the matter with you, man?" cried the good dame, now truly terrified at the savage's gleaming eyes; "what do you want of Mr. Rawson, whom you always call the pale man?"

"I want nothing of him," said the Indian, in a whisper; "not yet, but the Regulators want him."

"What has he to do with the Regulators? he does not belong to the band—he does not even approve of their proceedings."

"I believe it," said the savage, smiling; but this smile convulsed his gloomy features so fearfully, that the matron really began to fear that his wife's death had robbed him of his reason, and she looked around after the negro boy, who was engaged in saddling her horse before the door.

Assowaum read, perhaps, what was passing in her mind, for he drew his hand across his brow, smoothed back his streaming hair, and said softly:

"Assowaum is not sick; he came here to save your daughter—is it too late?"

"My daughter! what is the matter with her? what do you mean? speak out—what is it? what has happened to my child?"

"Is Marion already the pale man's wife?"

"No—but what has Mr. Rawson—"

"The Regulators are upon his track—he was Heathcote's murderer."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the matron, in terror, and she staggered to her chair, while the Indian stood calm and grave upon the threshold.

"That is a slander!" she said, at last, when she had somewhat recovered from her agitation—"a base and contemptible slander! Who is the wretch that accuses him?"

"Assowaum!" said the savage, in a whisper; "Assowaum!" he repeated, after a short and breathless pause. "The pale man may deny it;—I fear too that the blood of Alapaha stains his hands!"

"Frightful horrible!" groaned forth the unhappy dame; "and my child—but no, it is impossible—it is an error—a fearful, dreadful error! it must and will be soon cleared up; he will prove himself pure and innocent before any tribunal."

"Onesheshin!" said the Indian. "But where are your people? where is the old man? where the maiden? where the pale man himself?"

"He must soon be here—Marion and Roberts have ridden on before to his house; the marriage is to be performed this afternoon at the justice's. It is impossible—the devout and God-fearing man can not be a criminal! He may have killed the Regulator in a fit of anger—the man was always sneering at and insulting him."

"And whom did he accuse of the deed?" asked the Indian, gravely. "The pale man had two tongues in his mouth; with one he spoke with his God, and with the other he rebuked the innocent. Was that right, when he knew that the blood was upon his own hand?"

"I can not believe it! I can not comprehend it!" moaned the good dame, wringing her hands in anguish.

"Does Mrs. Roberts remember the day after Alapaha's murder?" said Assowaum, in a repressed tone, as he took from his girdle the tomahawk which he had left with his wife on that fatal night, and laid it upon the table. "With this weapon," he continued, almost in a whisper, yet still with a distinct, though hollow and sepulchral voice—"with this weapon the Flower of the Prairies defended herself against the cowardly murderer, and Rawson's arm was lame the next day. This button," he added, taking it from his ball-pouch, "Assowaum forced from Alapaha's fingers, which held it fast clutched in the death-struggle. It must be Rawson's—Assowaum has spoken with people who say it is one of Rawson's buttons."

"All this is but uncertain conjecture," cried the matron, rising, and gazing steadfastly in the eye of the red son of the forest; "it is no proof, man—it is impossible, I say—Rawson is innocent!"

"Onesheshin! then ask him, for there he comes," replied Assowaum, calmly. "The pale man will be still paler when Mrs. Roberts tells him that he is a murderer."

Before the matron was able to reply, the savage had thrust the tomahawk into his belt, and with noiseless step retired to a small recess formed by the bed, which stood in one corner of the apartment, and which was hung with a white mosquito-net. The next moment the preacher's horse stopped, covered with sweat, at the fence. His rider leaped from the saddle, and at once stepped upon the threshold. Notwithstanding the good dame's pallor and agitation, he was so much occupied with his own danger, that he did not observe her emotion, and, with a hoarse and almost inaudible voice, he inquired after his bride and the men; nay, an imprecation hovered upon his lips, as Mrs. Roberts, trembling indeed, but now more collected, answered that they had ridden on before, and expected him and her to follow them soon. His habitual reserve, however, restrained every rude word; and he was about to turn, in order to ride after them, and if possible to reach his own house in time to throw himself into the boat, and to attempt to escape by water, as his flight seemed already cut off by land—when Mrs. Roberts called him back, and begged him to approach her.

He was sensible, indeed, that all further dissimulation was but a useless waste of time, and that by delaying he might even lose the favorable moment for escape; but still, standing in the presence of the woman whom he had so fearfully deceived, his better feelings gained the ascendancy, and he resolved at least to part from her in peace. With this intention, he hastily returned to the table upon which she was leaning, and now, for the first time, remarked her changed and pallid countenance. Before he could question her concerning her agitation, however, the matron said, speaking in a very grave but still a friendly tone:

"Mr. Rawson, will you promise me to answer, frankly and honestly, a question that I wish to put to you?"

"I will," replied the preacher, half-surprised half-embarrassed; "but I must beg you to be quick, for I—really I must be gone—you know I have so much to occupy—"

He had not the courage to raise his eyes to hers; he was disturbed by an emotion which he could not explain, and he felt as if he were standing in the presence of his judge.

"Mr. Rawson," said the old dame, speaking in a low but distinct tone, "strange things have been told me about you this morning."

"About me? by whom?" asked the preacher, in alarm. "Who has been here?"

"Still they are only conjectures," continued Mrs. Roberts, calmly; "and I fervently hope they may prove nothing more; but it is necessary that you should know what is said of you, that you may defend yourself."

"I do not understand—these singular words—what has happened?" stammered Rawson, growing more and more embarrassed; and he already cast a side-glance toward the door, as if he were resolved to cut short the discourse, and escape all further questioning by flight. He had been playing unconsciously with a flower, that lay upon the table against which he was leaning, and he now took up the button which the Indian had left upon it.

"Do not touch that button, sir! for Heaven's sake, do not touch it!" cried the matron.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Roberts?" inquired Rawson, again collecting himself, and resolute to end the conversation. "You seem strangely agitated. Why not touch this button? It is one of mine, which I have probably—"

"Of yours!" cried the matron, in affright, supporting herself by the back of her chair—"yours?"

"What ails you?"

"That button Assowaum found in the hand of his murdered wife!" cried the dame, who, thus far, feeble and anxious, now rose erect, and gazed steadfastly in his face; "and you—you were the murderer!"

The preacher's hand glided with a rapid and convulsive movement beneath his vest where he doubtless wore concealed weapons; but, as he cast a hurried glance about the chamber, his eye met that of the Indian, who, with his rifle raised to his cheek held Rawson beneath its deadly aim and exclaimed, in a voice of thunder—

"A step, and the pale man dies!"

Rawson gave himself up for lost. Mrs.

Roberts, however, remarking the threatening attitude of the savage, and thinking that the latter was about to take vengeance on the spot, for the innocent blood of his wife, rushed toward him, struck up the deadly weapon, and cried in terror:

"Oh, not here! not here, before my eyes!"

Rawson saw this movement, and he knew that this was perhaps his last chance for flight. Before the Indian, whose advance was impeded by Mrs. Roberts, could anticipate him, he darted from the door with the agility of a panther, leaped upon his horse, and the next moment disappeared behind the thicket which bordered each side of the narrow road.

In furious haste the red warrior rushed after him; but, before he could again take aim at the flying form of his enemy, the thick-leaved bushes had concealed him from his view, and from the avenging ball. Assowaum now hastened to Mrs. Roberts's horse, which she was holding near the fence, threw off the side-saddle, tore the bridle from the hand of the dismayed negro, leaped upon the beast's bare back, and, striking its sides furiously with his unarmed heel, followed upon the track of his victim.

CHAPTER IX

"You see I was right—there's the house!" said Roberts, as the little cavalcade advanced upon the small clearing, and now paused before the high fence which surrounded the building that was so soon to contain Marion's entire world.

"Indeed!" cried Harper, in astonishment, "but the marked trees would have led us in a very different direction; I thought he must live higher up, on the hilly land. We are now almost like neighbors, for my house is not so very far from here, down the stream."

"Well, Marion, how do you like the place?" asked old Roberts, turning to his daughter, "eh? a little still and gloomy? Well, that's because the river is so near, and then there's the thick sycamores, the dark willows, and the cottonwood-trees, that stand around; for further up they are scarcer, and Steele lately assured me—"

"It is very still and lonely here," whispered Marion, grasping Ellen's hand, as if she feared to disturb the silence by the sound of her own voice; "I cannot imagine what makes the place so dreary, so—fearful!"

"Because there's no cattle about," said Barker; "that's very natural. Where there's no sound of the cow-bells, and no hens and pigs running around the yard—where there's not even a couple of dogs to leap upon you when you come home, and make such a noise that you can't hear yourself speak, or a flock of geese that begin to cackle just as you are calling to some one in the house—why, to my mind, such a place is hardly fit to live in."

"But what would be the use of Mr. Rawson's buying cattle," asked Harper, "when in a week, perhaps, he will move again?"

"Tut, tut!" replied Barker. "If I am to live on a place only three days, I must have a few chickens or pigs around me, to pick up the scattered corn, which otherwise is lost and wasted. See how the yard looks!—the grain lies strewed on the ground almost in heaps. Ah, if my old woman was to see that!"

"Yes, but things will change now," said Roberts, laughing; "his wife will arrange all that. But the horses are well cared for here, that's a fact; there are troughs enough."

"What is the matter, Ellen?" asked Marion, somewhat disturbed, as she heard her friend utter a low, half-repressed exclamation; "what is the matter?"

"Nothing," replied the young girl, in embarrassment, while she cast a rapid yet timid side glance at the house; "nothing—it was a delusion: but it seemed to me as if I saw an eye looking out between the two upper crevices—up there."

"Where? up there?" cried Barker, laughing. "A guest would hardly take up his quarters so high; there are better places in the house to lodge a visitor in. The door is unlocked."

"And what a door it is!" exclaimed Harper, who now opened it, and entered the house—"remarkably strong, as if wonderful treasures were kept here. Well, all looks pretty well," he then continued, glancing around him, "that is to say, for a bachelor; for the women would find fault with a good many things, I suppose. But that can't be helped. Matters don't look much better with us down the river. When Alapaha was alive, indeed," he added, breath-

ing a heavy sigh, "all was neat and comfortable; and now—"

"It will be so again, Harper," replied Barker, interrupting him, "perhaps better. Brown must marry, and then everything will go well with you."

"In with you, girls!" cried Roberts, who had now joined the two men, "in with you! Here your territory begins, and Marion may take possession at once."

"So!" he continued, following them into the house, "so that's right! Now, come and set things in order here, while we light a fire without, and hang over the iron kettle. There's no kitchen near the house, I see; and my wife, who can't stay here long, for in such matters—"

"Whew!" cried Barker, laughing, "there he goes again! Here's spunk, but where shall we make a fire? An awkward place for wood, this; it's at least fifty paces off. We shall have to go and cut some branches. Is there an ax about?"

"There's one in the corner," replied Harper.

"Good! In the meanwhile, do you stay here."

"No, I will help you bring the wood," said Roberts. "Harper can make the fire; the wind has blown together enough dry leaves and twigs."

The men now went, laughing and talking, to their tasks, while the girls remained alone in the house. They did not change their attitude, but, with their hands clasped together, they gazed, silently and earnestly, in each other's eyes, until at last, Marion, unable longer to control her feelings, cast herself upon her friend's neck, and relieved her sadly-oppressed bosom in a flood of tears.

"Marion, what ails you?" cried Ellen, in alarm, "for mercy's sake, what is the matter? There is something distresses you. I have long seen it. You are not happy."

"No!" sobbed the poor girl, and she wound her arms more closely about her friend, who endeavored to loose them, that she might gaze in the face of the weeper; "no—Heaven knows—I am not happy, and I shall never be!"

"But what is the matter? I have never seen you thus before. You shake and tremble! What is it? what is wanting to your happiness, Marion?"

"What is wanting?" cried the preacher's betrothed, starting wildly and convulsively, "what is wanting? Everything—everything in the wide world—confidence, love, hope—yes, even hope is wanting to me; and now—now it is too late—too late—I can not now draw back!"

"Marion, you torture me!" replied her friend, in a timorous whisper, as she clasped her in her arms; "what mean these singular words? Can you not confide in me?"

"I can and may," returned Marion, resolutely, as she brushed the dark locks from her brow. "A few moments are still mine, I am still mistress of myself; in an hour, perhaps, it will be too late. Listen, then, Ellen, and hear what has rendered me wretched until this moment; what, from this moment, will embitter my whole life.—But what is the matter? what do you see?"

"Look there!" cried the young girl, in astonishment; "isn't that Mr. Rawson? Good heavens! his horse must have run away with him. Look how he flies!"

"Hallo!" cried Barker and Roberts, who now first saw him from the edge of the wood where they were standing, "what the d—! has happened?"

"Thunder and lightning!" exclaimed Harper, leaping aside—for the foaming, panting beast had almost run over him—"Rawson, are you mad? What the deuce is the matter?"

The latter, however, vouchsafed to neither of the men an answer, or even a look. He leaped from his horse, rushed through the open gate, which he cast to again, and darted into the house. The maidens started with a cry of terror at his pale and agitated features, as he locked the door, drew to the iron bolts, tore his rifle from the pegs, cocked it, and raising it to his cheek, glanced quickly around the chamber, as if resolved to shoot down the first person who should approach him.

"Almighty Heaven! Mr. Rawson!" exclaimed Ellen, in death-like terror—"what would you do? murder your bride!"

"Cotton!" cried Rawson, hoarsely, when he had satisfied himself that none but women were in the hut, and without bestowing a second glance upon the maidens—"Cotton!"

"Ay, ay!" answered the latter, surily, from above, "I'm here. But look out below,

there!—the Indian's coming! The d—! he was close upon your heels!"

"Come down! quick!" cried the preacher, while he took several small plugs from the interstices between the logs, thus forming loopholes either for observation or defense; "come down, we shall soon have work upon our hands—we have visitors."

The hunter now descended from his hiding-place, climbing like a cat, by the rude logs that formed the walls of the hut, and Ellen grasped Marion's arm to keep herself from falling, as she beheld the person whom she most feared of all men on the wide earth, now appear upon the scene, under circumstances so singular and mysterious.

"What does this mean? For Heaven's sake, Mr. Rawson, let us out!" implored Marion, who now began to fear that she was a prisoner, and in the hands of ruffians. "Let me go to my father—what is the meaning of all this?"

"You'll soon find out, my beauty!" said the hunter, with a laugh of mockery, as he took a second rifle from above the chimney—"you'll soon find out. But, fire and fury!" he continued, turning angrily to Rawson, "you've coaxed me into a fine trap! I was a fool to wait for you here! I might now be sitting quietly in the canoe, and have five good miles between me and yonder knaves."

"Stand back there!" cried Rawson, through the crevice, without replying to his comrade's reproaches; "stand back, or you are dead men!" and at the same moment he discharged his rifle through the opening, then casting the weapon to the floor, he leaped to the bed, pushed aside the mattresses, and drew out four other loaded rifles.

"Wait, you red devil!" he muttered between his set teeth. "I hope I've cured you of playing the spy! Back from the door there!" he now cried, turning rudely to the maidens; "this is no child's play! Back, if you love your lives!"

"But what shall we do with the girls here?" asked Cotton, in a tone of vexation.

"Keep them as hostages," said the preacher; "their lives shall be warrant for ours—if we can hold out till dark, we are safe."

"I don't see how," muttered the hunter, while he first looked carefully around in all directions, and then loaded the rifle again from a powder flask, which Rawson pointed out to him. "They will light fires around the house in the evening, or, perhaps, try to set it on fire."

"The girls will secure us from that danger," said Rawson with a grim laugh; "but hallo! here comes old Roberts alone, without a rifle—he wants to have his daughter back again—it can't be, old man!"

The three men, as soon expecting to see the sky fall, as the scene which now passed before their eyes, had observed with astonishment the rapid approach of the preacher, and at first thought with Ellen that his horse had run away with him; scarcely, however, had the usually so quiet man disappeared in the house, and before Barker and Roberts, the one with the ax, the other with a lopped branch upon his shoulder, had reached the fence, the tramp of horses' hoofs was heard anew, and the next moment the Indian rode up, his long black hair fluttering in the wind, his rifle in his right hand, laid obliquely across the horse's back, and held close to the beast's neck, that it might not be caught by the thorns and creeping vines; the bridle hung loose in his left hand, and his head was bent almost to his right knee, that he might more distinctly see the tracks of the enemy whom he pursued.

"Assowaum!" cried the men, in astonishment and alarm, "What has happened? What do you want of the preacher? What has he done?"

"I want his blood!" said the savage, gnashing his teeth, "his heart's blood! the heart from his body!" and casting himself from the back of his foam covered horse, which, unused to such exertions, stood trembling in every limb, he rushed toward the fence to clamber over it. At this moment the preacher's voice was heard, a shot came from the hut, and Assowaum fell from the topmost bar of the fence. Before the men could recover from their fright, however, he leaped up, darted around the little inclosure, and then glided behind a large tree, whence he could command the rear of the house, and cut off all chance of flight toward the river.

Barker and Harper followed him thither,

while Roberts advanced to the house, firmly resolved to wrest his child from the hands of the man, whose singular behavior proclaimed but too plainly that he felt conscious of some crime, with which Roberts was unacquainted.

"Back there!" cried Rawson, calling to him from the house—"back, if you love life!"

"Give up my child!" replied Roberts; "let the two girls leave the house. I have nothing against you—I swear it! I do not even understand the meaning of all this; but you have fired at the Indian—blood has flowed, and I wish to take the women from a place where they are in danger—give up my daughter!"

"Back there!" roared the preacher, in a tone of menace, as he raised his rifle to his cheek. But Marion cast herself in his arms and cried in an entreating tone:

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. Rawson, would you murder my father?"

"Cotton, take away the girl," cried the preacher, angrily. "Do but hear how the old fool shakes the door; it's lucky they didn't try to break it down altogether; we might have fared ill. Now to work; the girls must be tied—we can't have them in our way—and if they're not silent, gagged too—we have but a few moments to spare, and we must make the most of them."

"Help! help!" cried the two maidens, as the two men rudely seized and bound them.

"Robber! scoundrel!" exclaimed old Roberts, shaking the oaken door with the strength of despair, while Barker rushed up to assist his friend, and Harper himself, notwithstanding his weakness, caught up a newly-lopped branch and hastened toward the hut to lend the aid of his feeble arm to the disconsolate father. But before they had clambered over the fence and reached the door, the trembling maidens were bound with strong ropes, and Rawson cried to them in a threatening tone:

"If you open your lips again to call for help, I will take aim at the white-headed old fool, who is shaking at the door, and shoot him down like a dog!"

"Mercy! mercy!" said the trembling Marion, in a whisper; "have mercy!"

"Shoot out, Cotton, but wound no one," cried Rawson, as he stepped with his rifle to a crevice in the rear of the hut, hoping from here to get a shot at the Indian, if the latter should imprudently expose himself. But after the first shot Assowaum had divined the intention of the preacher, who knew and feared him as his most bitter enemy, and who wished at all hazards to remove him from his path. Accordingly, when his first ardor had evaporated, adopting the mode of warfare peculiar to his people, he had fled to a cover, from which he could prevent the flight of his enemy until the arrival of the Regulators, who, as he well knew, were close upon his heels. To capture Alapaha's murderer alive and unhurt was now his sole thought—his sole aim.

He did not know, indeed, that Brown, to whom he was attached with all the fidelity of his nature, loved Marion, although, perhaps, he suspected it. But, notwithstanding this, nothing could induce him to renounce the purpose which he had formed. His wife he would and must avenge, were it to drag down destruction upon the heads of those most dear to him.

A ball from Cotton's deadly rifle, which tore Barker's hat from his head, now admonished the men of the danger to which they exposed themselves, in thus braving the fire of an enemy driven to desperation, and even Roberts restrained his friends from all further attempts to force the strong and heavy door, since they were not even armed, and therefore could not hope to assail the villain successfully in their stronghold.

"Leave me alone here!" he said; "he has been kindly received in my house, and he will not now refuse me my only prayer—the surrender of my child! Go, therefore," he added, as he saw that Barker lingered, and cast angry, savage glances toward the hut—"go—I hope to arrange all peaceably, and get at the meaning of this mystery."

With these words, as Barker and Harper left the inclosure, he turned to the open crevice, at which he supposed the preacher was standing, and was about to address him, when the latter called to him in a tone of scorn:

"Spare your breath, my worthy sir—I have preached too often myself to take any pleasure in the foolery. To come to a short and concise explanation, listen to my words, which are

not meant for a sermon, although this is the Sabbath and the Lord's day."

"So, then, I was not mistaken in you, knave!" cried the old man, grinding his teeth, and stamping furiously upon the ground. "Yes, mock at our credulity for trusting your smooth tongue! but woe to you if you touch a hair of the heads of the two girls whom an unhappy fate has thrown into your hands!—the flesh shall be torn piecemeal from your limbs!"

"What's the use of words? I—"

"Hold! do not speak yet!" cried the old man, in the most violent agitation. "Listen! You have committed some terrible crime, it appears for I cannot explain your conduct otherwise—but whatever it may be, you have still time for flight, and I will even assist you to make your escape. Take one of my horses—take money—but give me my child—give me back the two maidens! Remember how kindly we have treated you—remember that to-day I was to have called you my son-in-law!"

"Take up with the offer," whispered Cotton; "we shan't have a second chance so very soon—it's understood that I'm included in the bargain; I will let the girls loose."

"Hold!" cried Rawson, interrupting him; "are you mad? Do you think that the Indian behind the tree yonder will care for what the old graybeard here promises? Show your scalp at any open place, and see how soon his lead will scratch it. No; these are promises to entice a man into a trap; there's no chance of safety for us before it's dark."

"But why not force our way out now? The three men are all unarmed; they couldn't stop us."

"Doesn't the rifle of the d—d red-skinned rascal command the whole river bank?"

"But how, if the Regulators should come?"

"I wonder they are not here already," cried Rawson, laughing, scornfully—"the pestilence upon them!—but I defy them."

"I should like to know, then, how you expect to escape at night, if they surround the house?"

"They will not venture to do so with watch-fires," said Rawson, in a whisper, for in that case they would be exposed to our rifle-balls. If they camp in the dark we are safe. A narrow passage that Johnson and I dug with a world of trouble, leads under these boards to the spot where the canoe is concealed."

"And why not profit by it at once? Shall we have a better opportunity, rejoined Cotton."

"Fool!" cried Rawson, angrily, "that knavish red-skin stands at this moment exactly over the spot, and, although there's little danger that he will discover the boat, the cane is as thick there, yet it would be impossible for us to escape in it without attracting his attention."

"But the Regulators?"

"Blast them! they will do all that stands in their power; but they will not venture to attack the house, so long as we have these rifles to defend ourselves, and the maidens as hostages."

"Well," cried Roberts, from without, "have you considered my proposal? I see there are several of you. All that have sought protection in the house may go freely forth; it is still time, for the Regulators are not yet here; but give me my child again!—set the unhappy maidens at liberty!"

"Listen to my answer!" replied Rawson. "My life is forfeited, and yonder Indian is resolved to take it. If you can persuade him to agree to your conditions, I am ready to accept them; if not, remember that at the first attempt to force an entrance into this house, the two maidens shall die by my hand—if nothing worse befalls them."

"The Indian must consent!" cried Roberts, joyfully;—"he can not—Almighty God! it is too late! here come the Regulators!"

He was right; the dull tramp of about twenty horses was now heard, accompanied by the rustling of twigs and the crackling of dry branches; Assowaum shouted his war-cry, and a moment after the Regulators, headed by Brown and Hatfield, spurred upon the scene of action.

"Wagh!" exclaimed the Indian, as the newcomers, comprehending all at a glance, posted themselves around the hut—"Now he is mine! now Assowaum has his blood!"

Rawson seemed to have formed a correct appreciation of the danger which threatened him, if he fell into the hands of his red enemy, for he feared even the Regulators less than the stern and relentless savage. As the Indian,

therefore, in the delight of the moment, suffered a portion of his body to become visible from behind the cover which he had chosen, another shot came from the crevice of the hut, and the chief's blood stained the earth a second time."

Exasperated by this insolent boldness, the Regulators sprung from their saddles, and were about to tear down the fence at once, when Roberts interfered, and explained to them the dangerous situation of the two maidens.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Brown, "Marion in the hands of that wretch! What is to be done?"

"Storm the house!" cried Hatfield, furiously; "storm the house and drive out the varmint by violence. Let them venture to lay a finger upon the maidens, and we will burn the flesh from their bones! If they will only surrender peaceably, and at discretion, why—why, they shall only be hanged. Here are the ropes."

"Spare your fine phrases," retorted Rawson, who had overheard his words. "He who approaches within twenty paces of this house, is a dead man; there are six of us here, and we have eighteen rifles. But if you set so little value upon your lives as to venture, I swear, by the ever-living God, the girls shall die! I'm not jesting."

"The devil take the boasting scoundrel!" cried Hatfield, tearing down the fence rails.

"Follow me, comrades, and in five minutes the knaves are ours!"

"Hold!" exclaimed Brown, springing forward, "hold! think of the innocent maidens. These villains, if driven to despair, are capable of any atrocity. We must find other means to get them in our power. We can not expose to such hazard the lives of those whom we are bound to protect."

"Do you call it protecting them, to leave them five minutes longer in the hands of those ruffians?"

"We must contrive a way," answered Brown, "but not at the hazard of her life. Where is the Indian?"

"Grant us a free retreat," exclaimed Rawson—"give us, at the least, four-and-twenty hours' start, and we will set the maidens at liberty."

"Good! be it so!" cried Brown, quickly.

"Hold, sir!" said Hatfield, interposing. "We have here in our power the scoundrels who have been guilty of so many fearful crimes; we have in our power the murderer of poor Heathcote, whose blood calls for revenge, terrible revenge, and we may not throw away the opportunity so carelessly. The court must decide the question. Are you willing, men, to let the ruffian escape, merely because he threatens to murder a couple of girls whom he has in his power?—or—"

"Nol nol nol!" vociferated the crowd—Harper, Roberts, Wilson, and Brown, alone excepted.

"Men, you are fathers! think of your children!" exclaimed Roberts, in a tone of supplication.

"Roberts," said Stevenson—who had until now kept silence, and stepping forward he laid his hand upon the old man's arm—"do not fear; no harm shall happen to your daughter; but it would be foolish to set these creatures at liberty for a bare threat."

"Let us storm the den!" cried several voices. "The villain knows what he has to expect, and he will not aggravate his punishment by a new crime."

"No, ye men of Arkansas," said Stevenson; "it is true I am a stranger among you, but permit me to say a word—"

"Speak, Stevenson!" replied Hatfield. "You have acted as if you belonged to our band, and you have thus obtained equal rights with the rest of us."

"Well, then," resumed the old man, "hear my proposal. But, first of all, place sentinels around the house, that none of the knaves may escape while we are consulting here."

"The Indian is posted on the river," answered Brown, "and two of our men are stationed on each side toward the wood; we are here in front and escape is impossible."

"Listen to my plan, then," continued Stevenson. "The prisoners, whatever may be their number, know that it is impossible for them to reach the woods while it is light, and they have set their hopes, therefore, upon the approach of night. As matters now stand, we can effect nothing by force; for I think, with

Roberts and Brown, that if driven to desperation, they are capable of anything. We must resort to craft, therefore. As soon as it grows dark we will light our watch-fires here in front of the house, and the Indian must now and then show himself near them."

"He will not expose himself a third time to their balls," said Curtis.

"There will be no risk," replied the old man. "It is very uncertain shooting by the light of watch fires, and then they will be very anxious to keep us quiet, they will not be the first to renew hostilities. Their only hope is to escape by the river or the wood. Have they a canoe hereabouts?"

"There is none to be seen," answered Wilson.

"Good!" continued the old man; "then they will be the more tempted to swim the narrow stream to lead us from their track. We must post single sentinels along the edge of the wood, but so cautiously that no one observes it; and I would bet my head that we shall catch them, if they try to steal down to the water's edge in the dark."

"And must my daughter be left for so many hours in the hands of thieves and murderers?" exclaimed Roberts.

"That shall never be!" cried Hatfield. "It is now hardly eleven, and by Heaven, it is too long to wait; I am impatient to see the psalm-singing rascal dangling at a rope's end."

"True enough, Hatfield," rejoined the Tennessean, laughing, "I feel just so, myself; it will seem long to me, too. But what can we do? Let the rascals go free! You would not agree to that yourself; we could not answer for it to the county, to the whole State. And as little can we expose the poor girls to their fury. But here comes the Indian creeping along; see how carefully he keeps out of the range of their rifles! They must have a very particular grudge against him."

As Stevenson had said, Assowaum came gliding along toward them like a serpent, behind fallen trunks, blackberry-bushes and thick clumps of trees, and when he reached the small, open space which intervened between him and the men, he crossed it with the rapidity of lightning and sought a shelter behind the group that were here collected. His caution proved by no means useless; for scarcely had he emerged upon the clearing, when a third ball proved how accurately each of his movements was watched by those within the hut. But this time he brandished his rifle with an air of triumph, and then held out to Brown his arm, which had been hit by the second bullet. The latter at once tore his neckcloth from his neck and bound up the bleeding though trifling wound.

"What can be the cause of the preacher's singular enmity against you?" inquired Brown. "He does not waste a morsel of lead, if he can not aim it at your red skin."

"He knows me," replied the Indian, rising to his full stature; "he knows that his life is forfeited to my vengeance. He murdered Alapaha!"

"What! your wife?"—"The preacher?"—"Rawson?"—"The squaw?"—such were the hurried exclamations which broke from the startled crowd.

"He murdered Alapaha!" repeated the savage, softly. "It was his blood that stained this tomahawk."

"The fruit is over-ripe," cried Hatfield. "It seems to me a sin to wait an hour longer."

"Hold!" replied the Indian. "If you storm the house, the pale man will die; he knows his fate—he will be brave. But he belongs to the 'Feathered Arrow,' and he must not die. He is mine! Wait until the sun is in his bed. Assowaum will show you the way."

"At least occupy their attention now," said Brown. "The poor girls will quite despair if they know that we are here and yet hear no sign of life from us."

"Of course we must not leave the knaves too much leisure," responded Wilson. "Who knows what they might do, if undisturbed? If I'm not deceived, that ruffian Cotton is within, and he is capable of anything."

"Atkins's mulatto has escaped us also," said Cook, "and it's possible that he has taken refuge here."

"Rawson spoke of six," interposed Curtis.

"Boasting," rejoined Stevenson, "sheer boasting; he wants to frighten us. But is the place occupied where the Indian was posted?"

"Your son went in that direction," replied Hatfield. "He'll keep a sharp look-out."

"Good! Then we will once more summon the garrison to surrender, and threaten to storm the hut. This, at least, will hold them in check," said Brown. "But who will be our messenger?"

"I have no objection," replied Barker. "I will certainly do all I can to occupy the knaves; but I would rather fall upon them with knife and rifle. The d—l fly away with them! my forefinger itches to send them half an ounce of lead, if there was no danger of hitting the girls."

"Hallo! who comes here?"

"It is your nigger, Roberts," replied Cook; "your wife must be in mortal terror, for as we rode by she looked white as a sheet, and she called out to us to save her child."

"Send the lad back, and say that the girls are in safety," cried Harper, "or she will worry herself to death. Before the boy gets there, I hope we shall have made the words good."

"Of course I can't let her know how matters really stand," replied the old man, shaking his head; "she would be dreadfully frightened. But how can she know that Rawson—"

"She cried, 'Save my child from the clutches of the preacher!'" said Cook. "How she heard of it, I don't know."

"He betrayed himself," replied Assowaum. "But time flies. Yonder come the buzzards, they know their prey. We must now act like them, and swarm around the hut until evening. The pale man aims his rifle at Assowaum, as the wild turkey looks at the eagle when he sails above him. But as soon as the whip-poor-will cries for the first time, then the sight upon his rifle will disappear, and he must turn his ear on all sides, to listen if he does not hear the war-cry of the Obidjewa."

CHAPTER X.

"SPARE your bullets," said Cotton, surlily, as Rawson took aim at the Indian while he glided toward the men, and at last fired as he leaped across the narrow clearing; "you might make a better use of them. The Indian isn't a bit more dangerous than any one of the others. Should we fall into the hands of the band, they will have the ropes ready for us before a red-skin can say a word in the business."

"If I were a thousand miles from here," answered the preacher, gnashing his teeth, "I should not think myself safe until I knew that yonder red devil was under ground. I laugh at the others."

"He has left his post," said Cotton, in a whisper; "wouldn't it be possible for us to set the canoe afloat, and at least escape to the other shore?"

"Don't be a fool!" muttered Rawson, as he reloaded the discharged rifles, and examined the pans of the remainder. "Would you, by one act of folly, cut off our last chance of escape? If we venture to push out the canoe before it's dark, we're sure to be discovered, and we lose our boat, and then all is over with us. Even if we were to reach the opposite shore, we should have the whole pack of yelping knaves upon our track in half an hour. Remember, it has been raining."

"True; but how if they should surround us so that we can't get to it in the night, and afterward starve us out?"

"Starve us out!" cried Rawson, with a scornful laugh; "and who would die first, the girls or we?"

"Certainly," replied Cotton, thoughtfully, "they wouldn't do that on their account; but I don't know—"

"I will tell you, then," whispered Rawson, leading him aside, that the two maidens might not overhear his words. "The place where the canoe lies is so concealed, and so far from here, that they will not think of posting a sentinel there. I have an idea of their plan: they hope that, as soon as it is dark, we shall make an attempt to steal down to the bank of the river; and that would be our only course, but for the underground passage."

"And what shall we do with the girls? I feel greatly inclined to take them with us. They could cook our supper when we camp out nights. We needn't bind ourselves to them by any particular marriage-ceremony."

"We must take them with us," rejoined Rawson, in a still lower whisper, "were it only to protect us from the balls of our enemies on the shore, if they happen to discover our flight too soon."

"Good!" exclaimed Cotton, rubbing his hands. "That rascal Wilson belongs to the Regulators. It will give me particular satisfaction to snap away so delicate a morsel from his mouth. But how if they scream?"

"I'll see to that," replied Rawson, softly. "Of course, we shall have to gag them; but we must not appear to be talking about them, or they will suspect something. In the meantime, I will contrive a story, which will quiet them until evening. Keep a watchful eye all the while upon the men, or they might take us by surprise," he continued, aloud: "and as soon as it is dark, we will steal out softly; if we can reach the wood, we are safe. But do you," he added, turning to the maidens, "keep yourselves quiet and peaceable until then; and when we leave the house, if you will swear not to call for help until we have been gone a full hour, you shall be restored to your friends this very night."

"We will pray for your successful escape," cried Ellen, joyfully, "but keep your word; and oh, loosen these cords! I promise—"

"Don't waste your breath, my darling," said Cotton, as he passed from crevice to crevice, watching the movements of the enemy. "Be contented that you have your tongue at liberty; you must manage without your arms until evening."

"But the cords hurt me," exclaimed Ellen; "you have tied them so tight that they cut my flesh."

"Well, that can be remedied," said Rawson, and he approached the maidens, to slacken the knots which bound them. "And how is my sweet bride?" he continued, addressing Marion, who turned her face from him in scorn. "What! so angry?" he added, smiling, as he tenderly brushed aside the locks which shaded her fair forehead.

"Back, traitor!" cried the lovely girl, her eyes flashing with anger; "back, or I will call for help, and defy your threats and your weapons!"

"But, dearest child—"

"To your post, Rawson! p'ison and rattle-snakes!" cried the bunter, angrily, "is this a time for such foolery? Wait until—there, the Regulators are separating again," he continued, hastily interrupting himself; "it almost seems as if they would venture an assault. I have half a mind to send a ball into Brown's body; he is just within range."

Marion leaned trembling against the bedpost to which the maidens were fastened.

"No, spare your lead," replied Rawson; "we mustn't irritate them now. If they approach within twenty paces, and their movements look suspicious, then fire; and, in this case, aim at the leaders, of course—Brown, Hatfield, Wilson, and Cook—these are the most dangerous."

"And the Indian?"

"He is an exception," cried Rawson; "wherever an inch of red-skin shows itself, then my rifle will speak."

"Yonder he steals again behind the bushes," said Cotton, pointing through a crevice in the hut; "look, how he creeps along the ground! It's impossible to get a fair chance at the rascal."

"Give us a sample of your skill with the rifle; you are always bragging of it!" cried Rawson, inciting him; "send me a bit of lead between the red devil's ribs, and I will give you two hundred dollars."

"Thunder and lightning!" said the hunter, in astonishment, without turning his eyes, however, from the Indian, whose form was now and then visible for a few seconds, "you must be confounded rich, if you would give two hundred dollars—"

He raised his rifle quickly to his cheek, dropped it, however, after a while, and added: "Two hundred dollars for a single shot! but I'll try it, if he comes within range of my rifle—"

Again the barrel was thrown up, but this time also the "Feathered Arrow" reached a cover before the hunter could take aim and fire.

"A plague upon his shadow!" cried Cotton, stamping upon the ground; "I would as soon follow a streak of lightning through a hedge-fence with my rifle—he shoots along the ground like an arrow, from which the rascal has his name. What devilry is he contriving? Rawson, keep your eye upon the varmint, or he will spy out the boat, and then good-night to the island."

The Indian, however, had no particular ob-

ject in view, and was far from suspecting that a stout canoe lay concealed in the dense cane, which bordered the shore and overhung the river; he thought only of engaging the attention of the besieged. After dark he intended to steal upon the enemy, and take them by surprise, and several of the Regulators, Cook and Curtis among the rest, had promised to support him. Even if the besieged put their threat into execution—even if the maidens fell beneath their blows—what cared the Indian for this? his wife also had been murdered—no one had brought her aid—the murderer was in yonder hut, and before another sun shone upon its roof, he must be dead or in his power.

Thus hour after hour passed by; the "big light" had crossed the zenith, and was sinking lower and lower toward the horizon; the landscape was already bathed in fainter, redder hues, and the distant billtops, and the summits of the gigantic pines, glowed in the golden light of the setting orb; the ravenous night-birds forsook the shady nests in which they had slept away the hot noon, and, like the shark in the clear, blue water, sailed through the green waving sea of leaves after their prey. Here and there the merry squirrel was leaping from branch to branch, and on calling in vain for its comrades, retreated to its nest; rabbits crept from their lurking places, from hollow trees and dark holes, and pricked up their long ears in wonder at finding the place occupied by men, which since their memory had served them for a playground; while a small night-bawk hovered high in the clear evening sky, uttering at intervals, in short and broken tones, its sharp, hoarse cry.

Evening came, and with it the crisis of this contest; for, until now, the besiegers' sole object had been to occupy the attention of the enemy, by threatened attacks and by sudden movements, now on this side of the hut, and now on the opposite.

"As soon as the sun has set," whispered Rawson to his comrade, "I will steal down to the boat and reconnoiter. I am in hopes the canoe is afloat; it was so yesterday morning, and the river hasn't fallen much. Keep a good watch in the meanwhile, and when I come back, we will take the weapons down, and the chest, and—then gag the girls—they must be our last load. If they are contrary—well—you have good bones—stun them with a blow of your fist, but don't strike too hard."

"Never fear," said Cotton, laughing, "a bit of a swoon or so will answer very well; at least, until we have five miles behind us—afterward—"

"Speak lower; your sweetheart, the pert thing, is pricking up her ears. If they raise an outcry too soon, it might spoil our plan; if they scream a little when we gag them it will do no harm. The fools will attack the house, perhaps; and while they are breaking their heads against the oaken door, we can steal through the passage to the canoe."

"We must then cross the river at once," said Cotton; "we could glide down unseen in the shadow of the thick cane on the other side—it's lucky the girls have on dark colored gowns! But what shall we do with them afterward?"

"With the girls?" asked Rawson. "Nonsense! don't trouble your head about that now; at the worst, there is room enough for them on the island, or—in the Mississippi. But I will go—keep a sharp watch, Cotton—it is still light enough for you to see if the Regulators meditate an attack against us."

"Never fear about me; but, be quick! the ground begins to burn under my feet. There is the red rascal stealing from the river again—shall I send a bullet after him?"

"No, it's too late now," said Rawson, as he raised the plank which concealed the subterranean passage; "you couldn't hit him—it's very uncertain shooting by this light—but keep an eye upon him—see where he stops—I'll be back soon."

With these words he disappeared in the passage, and Cotton walked quickly from one opening to the other, to watch every movement of the enemy, and to guard against the danger of being surprised at the last moment.

"Marion," said Ellen, in a whisper to her friend—"Marion, take courage! I have got one hand loose—while Rawson was slackening the knot, that fellow's warning called him away, before he had fastened them tightly again—now they are both at liberty."

"Loose my hands also," whispered Marion; "I am almost dying from pain and terror."

"Be quiet, he's coming this way," said the cautious Ellen, as Cotton approached, without heeding them, however, to watch his enemies on this side. Fearful of exciting suspicion, Ellen did not change her position in the slightest degree, but glanced anxiously around to see where the nearest weapons were lying, that, in case of need, she might grasp a knife or a rifle, and defend herself and her friend.

Upon a chair, scarcely two paces distant from her, lay a long pistol, and against each wall—she could almost reach the nearest—leaned a loaded rifle, placed thus that weapons of defense might be ready on every side.

"Unloose these cords," implored Marion, "I can not endure them longer."

"Wait but a few seconds," said Ellen. "See, as soon as Cotton is in that corner again, I can move and free you;—do you then take the rifle that stands nearest you. Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes," whispered the maiden; "my father taught me."

"So much the better; we will then push back the bolts, and try to escape."

"But think of the danger—Rawson has promised us safety, if we are still and quiet," said Marion.

"I do not trust him," replied her friend, in a whisper; "for I heard words which lead me to fear treachery—now—in a moment—as soon as he steps into that corner, I can free your hands."

Cotton had passed slowly around the chamber, placing his eye in turn to the crevices, and now approached the bed to which the maidens were bound, and the curtains of which would hide them from his sight when he stepped behind them.

Ellen had waited for this moment; the thick, dark-colored mosquito-net now concealed him, and she had already advanced one foot to grasp the weapon, when Rawson's head appeared above the entrance of the passageway, and the next instant he stood in the middle of the apartment, with his glance fastened upon the maidens, a picture of the keenest attention.

"Cotton, did you hear nothing?" he asked, softly, as the latter stepped from the corner.

"Hear anything! where?"

"It seemed to me as if some one broke off a piece of a board somewhere; can anybody have crept to the house?"

"He must have been sly, then," grumbled Cotton; "the high fence is still standing, and it's not yet so dark that a man couldn't see another climbing over it. But of what use would it be to them if they did? Our loopholes are capitally arranged, and if—"

"Well, well," said Rawson, "I feel quite uneasy here now; I wish we were upon the water."

"Is the canoe in order?"

"Afloat and ready; and, now, let us go—the Regulators are mostly collected in front of the house; and if they have, secretly, posted sentinels along the edge of the river, which I greatly doubt, we can paddle safely across the La Fave, and glide down in the shadows of the other bank."

"But the girls?"

"Must be silenced; now, away to the boat!"

"And how shall we take down our weapons and the chest, if we have the girls to carry?"

"Do you creep on before and take the little chest and two rifles with you—you can't miss the way—the passage is perfectly straight, and the canoe lies just at its other extremity; make as little noise as possible in placing the chest and the rifles on board, and then hurry back. In ten minutes all must be finished."

"What provisions do we take with us?"

"I have just carried them down; I had laid them in the passage, and they are now in the canoe."

"Well done! keep a good watch in the meanwhile. I'll be back at once."

Rawson paced the chamber restlessly. Not a breeze stirred without—not a sound was heard. Deathlike stillness lay upon the scene; around the watch-fires alone, which were a hundred and fifty paces from the house, toward the hills, a few dark forms were seen moving slowly.

"What are the rascals driving at? Can they be planning mischief anywhere?" he muttered to himself, as he stood with folded arms before one of the crevices, and looked out upon his enemies.

In doing this he had turned his back to the maidens.

Ellen glided noiselessly forward, and took the pistol from the stool, then withdrew with the rapidity of lightning to her former position, for Rawson now turned and walked to the opposite side of the hut.

"What can keep Cotton so long?—the d—l take him!" he cried, with a bitter imprecation, renewing his walk to and fro in the apartment; "should he prove false—"

He leaped into the passageway and listened.

"If I only had a knife to cut your cords!" whispered Ellen, in the ear of the trembling Marion.

"The plank on which I am standing seems to move," said the latter softly, yet in a tone of alarm—"what can that mean?"

"They must be friends!" exclaimed Ellen, her joy rendering her forgetful of the requisite prudence.

"What's the matter?" inquired Rawson, raising his head above the surface of the floor.

"Nothing," replied Ellen.

"Be silent then!" cried the preacher, angrily, stooping down to listen again.

"I would shoot," said Ellen, "but my hand trembles so that I should miss him."

"There must be some one under this plank," whispered Marion; "I feel it stir plainly."

"Move your foot then. They are friends," said Ellen. "The river is on the other side of the house, and the secret passage leads down to the bank."

"All-merciful Heaven! if my hands were only free!" moaned the maiden.

"A plague upon the fellow! I neither hear nor see anything of him," cried Rawson, angrily, leaping up into the apartment again. "The d—l take me, if I don't believe the scoundrel is playing false; but, then, God be merciful to his soul! I must after him."

At this moment the plank was raised, and the glaring, threatening eye of the Indian flashed from the opening.

Rawson had seized a rifle, and was in the act of descending into the passage-way, when the heavy plank, against which the "Feathered Arrow" was pressing, yielded, and moved aside with a grating noise—the preacher turned quickly, and, in the uncertain twilight which prevailed in the hut, encountered the glance of his deadly foe, who, taking advantage of Rawson's astonishment, struggled to free himself from his dangerous position.

Notwithstanding the preacher's alarm, however, he collected himself with sufficient readiness, to threaten imminent peril to the Indian, who had not yet extricated himself from the narrow opening. His situation was the more critical as he could neither advance nor retreat with the requisite rapidity; and Rawson, darting forward, had already raised the butt of his rifle to dispatch him, when Ellen, with a courage worthy of a chief, sprung toward him, and discharged the weapon which she had seized at the preacher, just as the fatal blow was on the point of descending.

"D—n!" cried the latter, starting backward; but this interval enabled Assowaum to make his way from the narrow space, which had so nearly proved fatal to him. Like a panther of the woods, he clambered into the apartment, and the next instant sprung with a furious bound at the breast of the murderer, who, with a cry of anguish and despair, sunk powerless beneath his grasp.

At this moment the plank was raised again, and Curtis slowly made his way into the chamber, while, at the same time, Cotton, who had returned to take away the maidens, appeared at the entrance of the passageway, and seeing his comrade's danger advanced resolutely to his aid.

Ellen had, in the meanwhile, hastened to the door and pushed back the bolts, while the Indian, now boldly facing his new enemy, tore his tomahawk from his girdle, and without removing his left hand from the throat of his victim, brandished his weapon against this unexpected antagonist.

The latter, however, after having cast a rapid glance around him, soon saw the danger to which he was exposed; for, on the one hand, Curtis was advancing to assail him, while, on the other, Brown, followed by the Regulators, rushed through the now open door. With the rapidity of lightning, he sprung back into the subterranean passage, and, favored by the darkness, fled toward the concealed canoe. On seeing the fugitive disappear, Curtis imagined that he had thrown himself upon the ground,

in order to avoid the first assault, hoping, perhaps, to escape from the hut in the confusion. With a loud imprecation upon his lips he darted forward, and plunged head-foremost into the open hole.

"Wagh!" cried the Indian, his eyes gleaming with savage joy, "who will come back first?"

"Torches here!" cried Hatfield, stepping to the door; "bring torches, and surround the house; one of the rascals is hid under the planks."

Several men at once approached with lighted torches, and Cook, tearing one from the hands of the first whom he encountered, followed after his friend Curtis. Brown, however, sprung to the assistance of Marion, and, trembling from the joy of victory and renewed hope, he was scarcely able to sever, with his hunting-knife, the bands which confined the poor maiden, who, overcome by the rapid alternation of terror and delight, sunk helpless and swooning into the young man's arms.

Wilson and Ellen formed a separate group at the door.

"Here is an underground passage," cried Cook, from below; "the rest have fled. To the river, men! quick! and shoot at everything that stirs."

The Regulators rushed from the house, and soon after five or six shots were heard in succession.

"The scoundrels had a boat, then," said Hatfield; "and the Indian and I thought we had searched every nook and corner."

"Are you hurt, Curtis?" asked Cook, as he helped his friend upon his feet, in the entrance to the passage.

"Yes—no—I think not. What the deuce has happened to me? where am I? What's that shooting for?"

"They are firing at the fugitives. You are in Rawson's house, or rather under it—a nicely-arranged passage this. Well, every old fox digs his hole for a time of need; the thing was planned cunningly enough, but I think the Indian was a little too quick for them."

"Where is Rawson?" inquired Curtis who, for a moment stunned by his fall, now recalled to mind what had passed.

"Here!" answered the Indian, as he took a leathern thong from his ball pouch, and bound the prisoner's feet together; "who has a handkerchief?"

"What do you want of a handkerchief?" asked Cook, who had now made his way from the passage.

"The preacher is wounded," said the Indian, softly; "the young maiden saved the 'Feathered Arrow's' life, and shot the pale man in the shoulder—*Inyn!* how white he looks!"

"The Indian is really capable of compassion," said Stevenson, who had just entered the hut, "a new quality that I have discovered in him."

"Compassion!" cried the chief, wildly, as he raised himself to his full height, and cast an angry glance at the speaker. "Who says that Assowaum has compassion for Alapaha's murderer? But he must not die now—here—of this wound, dealt by a woman. The vengeance must be mine. Who has a bandage for the pale man's shoulder?"

"Here is my neckcloth," said Stevenson, reaching it to the Indian; "but how is this?" he continued, approaching his torch to the face of the half-swooning preacher; "I have seen that face somewhere—the features are familiar to me."

Rawson opened his eyes, and gazed timidly at the speaker.

"Heaven and earth! that's the man that murdered the cattle-dealer!" exclaimed the old farmer, leaping up, partly in terror, partly in furious anger—"by all that lives, that is the wretch who shot him down like an assassin!"

"Away with you!" cried the wounded man, grinding his teeth, and turning his face aside.

"Where is Brown?" asked several voices.

"Here," said the latter, in a low tone; "can no one bring vinegar? Miss Roberts has fainted."

"My child! my dear child!" cried Roberts, in dismay, as he knelt near the senseless body of the pale but still beautiful girl.

"Marion! dearest, best Marion!" whispered Ellen in her ear, when, after her first surprise and agitation had passed, she had extricated herself, blushing, from Wilson's arms.

"Here is some water and whisky," said young Stevenson, reaching the leader of the Regulators a tin-cup filled with the former.

and a hunting-flask containing the latter beverage. Brown conducted himself with considerable dexterity in the performance of his grateful office; he rubbed the forehead, temples, and hands, of his beloved Marion, with a perseverance that excited Barker's utmost astonishment.

"Harper," he said to his friend, whispering in his ear, "is Brown a doctor?"

"No," replied the latter, smiling—"why?"

"Because he understands the rubbing so well; my arms would have been asleep long ago—he goes it like steam."

"Father!" sighed forth Marion, unclosing her large, bright eyes; "father!" Her glance did not meet her father's, however, although the latter held her hands fast clasped in his own, but that of Brown, who, bending over her with tender care and heartfelt joy depicted in his features, was watching the gradual recovery of the being whom he loved so warmly.

"Father!" sighed the maiden, and then closed her eyes again, but with so calm and sweet a smile, that it almost seemed as if she looked upon the passing scene as a pleasant dream, and feared to lose it on waking to actual life.

"Have you been able to overtake any of the fugitives?" asked Hatfield, at last, who thought it his duty to assume the office of leader, since Brown's medical talents were so much in requisition at this moment.

"No," replied Harper, "we haven't caught any of them, but I think our balls haven't been thrown away. When we reached the river we saw the dark shadow of a boat, gliding down the opposite shore, and fired our rifles at it; all at once we heard something fall into the water, and splash around in it for a while, but it was too dark to see more. I hope to Heaven that our leaden messengers have done their duty, and, at least, settled one of the rogues."

"There was only one with this man here," said Ellen, timidly. "His name is Cotton; you all know him."

"Cotton! the d—l!" cried Wilson. "It's lucky I didn't know it before; I should have stormed the house on my own account, and might have fared badly."

"And what is to be done with the preacher?"

"To-morrow the Regulators hold their court," said Brown, "and he must be tried before it. Four of his accomplices await their sentence at the same time—you know the spot. I should be glad if you would be present, Mr. Roberts. We need the aid of old and experienced heads at such grave proceedings. Who are keeping guard in the wood?"

"Only a few," replied Cook. "The Canadian with some of our men. There were but two birds in the nest, then?"

"Have you not succeeded in discovering any trace of the mulatto?"

"No, nothing of consequence; the Indian thinks, indeed, that this morning—"

"He is in the mountain," said Assowaum; "I saw his tracks."

"After the rain?"

"He must have gone home again after the rain. When a bird's nest is destroyed, it flutters for a long time about the tree. The yellow boy grieves for the loss of his warm bed."

"Where is Wilson?" said Brown, looking around after the young man.

"He is seeing to the horses," replied Hatfield; "and it will be best for the ladies to set out for home, but some of us must remain here in order to search the place carefully by daylight."

"Hatfield, will you do me a favor?" said Brown, hesitating, and as it seemed to the former slightly blushing; "I may be obliged to—"

"With all my heart," said the Regulator, interrupting him, and laughing heartily. "Of course you can't leave your patient, and I'll cover your retreat. I will be at the appointed place at eleven in the morning. But you needn't wait for me to begin the trial—set to work at once."

"We will proceed against Atkins and Jones first," replied Brown. "We shall be obliged to commence early; therefore, come as soon as possible."

"Oh, there are the horses!" exclaimed Harper. "Well, boy! well, you dog, haven't you a single word for your old uncle this evening? Has this young girl driven him entirely out of your head—heh?"

"Uncle," exclaimed Brown, and he grasped the kind old man by the hand—"uncle, I am very happy!"

"How shall we remove the prisoner?" asked Curtis; "we have no boat."

"The Indian will see to that," replied Barker; "there he sits near him, and gazes in his face like a young girl at her sweetheart. Brr!—my flesh creeps when I think of the blood-thirsty thoughts that are passing through that Indian's heart and head for all that soft look. These savages are a frightful set."

"I wouldn't be in the preacher's skin," muttered Curtis, "for all the treasures of the earth; for if the Regulators should set him free, I believe the Indian would fasten his teeth in his throat, and suck his blood."

"His wound will prevent him from riding," said Stevenson, who had in the meanwhile examined Rawson's shoulder; "the bone is broken."

"Do you think that the wound is dangerous?" asked the Indian, as if waking from a dream.

"If he is compelled to ride, and should take cold—the night is damp—I wouldn't answer for it," replied Stevenson.

"I will carry him," said the Indian.

"Whom?" asked Barker; "the preacher?"

"Yes, I will carry him," replied Assowaum, and he wrapped his blanket about the wounded man.

"Gentlemen," said old Roberts, addressing those present, "some of you, as I have heard, are to remain here to-night; these, I expect to breakfast to-morrow morning; but the others who are to set out with us, as the prisoner must be removed from here, and my house doesn't stand so very far from the road, for my wife is probably by this time quite anxious about us, and then—"

"I invite you all," cried Harper, laughing, as he continued the address which Roberts seemed in no hurry to conclude, "to stop to-night at my friend's house; and though we may be a little straitened for room, yet we can make out to get along—we live in Arkansas."

"Bravo!" cried Roberts, laughing good-naturedly, "spoken from my very heart! So then, gentlemen, if you will content yourselves with my plain hospitality, we will set out at once. But does the Indian really mean to carry the unhappy wretch?"

Assowaum answered this question by the act. Notwithstanding the wound which he had received, he raised the heavy frame of the preacher as if it had not weighed a feather and walked onward, without uttering a word, along the narrow path. Rawson must have been in a swoon, however, for he lay motionless in his enemy's arms, and his pale face rested upon the shoulder of the avenger, whose dark locks floated around the preacher's brow.

"He will not murder him, will he?" whispered Marion, anxiously, to the young man, upon whose arm she had thus far leaned, and who now helped her into the saddle.

"No, Marion, fear no further bloodshed this evening," replied Brown; "but to-morrow the court of the Regulators will decide upon the fate of the wretch who has been guilty of three terrible murders—the measure of his sins is full."

"Frightful! frightful!" groaned the poor maiden, remembering the danger which she had just escaped of falling a prey to this monster.

"And where is our little heroine—our Amazon?" asked Barker, looking around on all sides after Ellen. "Thunder and lightning! where does she hide herself? I proclaim myself her gallant this evening."

"Too late," said Brown, laughing—"too late, sir—the post is occupied. Mr. Wilson had the kindness to offer his services, as no one appeared in haste to do so."

"Too late? so!" said Barker; "that has happened to me very often before now, and I could tell you a capital story about it, if the sight of that Indian before us didn't freeze my blood—see how he carries his victim in his arms as carefully and delicately as a mother bears her child!"

"It's true," said Roberts, who rode at his side, "there is something fearful in contemplating the calm coldness with which the red-man proceeds toward his revenge. But he would rather resign the dearest treasure in the world than leave unfulfilled the oath which he took at the grave of his wife. You were present at the time, Barker?"

"Yes," replied the latter, starting from a deep reverie, "just so—yes—by the by, Roberts, haven't you, between ourselves, a drop of whisky in the house? I know your wife can't

bear it—but I think I shall be sick to-night, if I don't get a stiff dram. As for eating, I have lost all appetite."

"Put me in mind of it when we get home," said Roberts, softly; "but—don't let Marion observe it—the women always blow through the same horn, and if they did nothing else, why—they'd turn the jug bottom upward and let it run out—and that would be a pity—it's genuine Monongahela."

"Do you know, Roberts, what the preacher puts me in mind of, as he lies in the arms of his enemy?" asked Barker, thoughtfully, after a short pause.

"What?"

"Why, of a knavish Spanish trader, who, according to a legend of the Pawnees, was tied on horseback to the body of his wife, whom he had murdered, and he is doomed to fly with her over the prairies through all eternity. I don't believe that the Methodist will see anything else as long as he lives, than the Indian's eye fastened upon him."

"Come, Barker, let us ride on before to quiet my wife and make preparations for our visitors," said Roberts. "My blood runs cold here!"

The two men galloped by the rest of the train, and as the torches which they bore in their hands for a moment illuminated the face of the preacher and the Indian, they saw how Assowaum gazed anxiously down upon his victim, then raised his eyes again with a triumphant glance and walked quickly onward, as if relieved from a heavy burden. The preacher was still alive!

CHAPTER XI.

THE spot where the Regulators were to hold their court was upon the summit of a steep hill or "bluff," which rose perpendicularly on the southern shore of the La Pave, and was bordered on either side, the eastern and western, by the low bottom-land and thick cane-brake.

About a mile further down the river, the stream intersected that road upon which the Regulators were led astray by the horse-thieves, and the little hut in which Alapaha fell by the hand of the murderer stood, as the reader is aware, scarcely half a mile distant from this down the La Pave.

But, still and desolate as that steep height usually was—for there was not a house within many miles on this side of the stream—it now displayed a scene replete with animation and activity; for beneath the slender pines and the thick-leaved oaks and hickories, about twenty robust hunters and farmers, genuine specimens of the true backwoodsman, lay reclining about five different fires, some busied preparing breakfast, others eating it, while the blue smoke rose curling in the clear morning air, as in times long past, when the original proprietors of the soil, the Arkansas Indians, occupied these heights.

Usual as such encampments are in Arkansas, and in the western woods generally, yet two of the groups of which it consisted gave to it an aspect which indicated that something of more than ordinary interest was passing here. They formed, as it were, the background of this picture, and reclined furthest from the steep declivity that overhung the river, beneath two separate clumps of dogwood-trees, whose white and blossoming branches overshadowed them as with a roof of flowers. The principal personages composing them, however, seemed to give little heed to the beauty of the scenery: they gazed, brooding darkly upon the yellow leaves of the former year, upon which they lay outstretched with fettered limbs.

One of these groups was composed of the prisoners, Atkins, Johnson, Weston and Jones, guarded by two backwoodsmen who stood near them leaning upon their long rifles.

The other group consisted of but two individuals, the preacher and the Indian. Above them a crimson-colored, hanging vine wound its fantastic wreaths, with its funnel-shaped flowers of a purple hue, between which shone the white, swelling blossoms of the spice bushes and dogwood-trees, forming a charming contrast. Beneath this roof of verdure and of flowers, near a bed of leaves carefully gathered together, which, spread with warm blankets, served as a soft and comfortable resting-place for the wounded preacher, cowered the Indian, turning his attention seldom, and then but for an instant only, from the form which lay outstretched before him, in order to feed the fire that burned near them, which he had lighted to temper the somewhat cool morning air for the suffering prisoner. A pitcher, filled with water, stood near him, which he often reached to the parched lips of the wounded man to quench his thirst; as often carefully arranging the blankets again, that no rude breeze might blow upon him.

The barking of dogs was now heard at no great distance, and soon the Regulators, who had been engaged in the assault on the pre-

ceding evening with Brown, Curtis, Wilson, and a stranger at their head, rode up the hill, and saluted the men who were already assembled here. Brown then introduced the stranger as a lawyer from Pulaski county, who, being accidentally in the neighborhood, had heard that they were about to hold a court to-day, and desired to be present. No objection was offered, and Brown, having informed them that Hatfield could not join them before an hour, declared the court opened.

First of all, twelve jurymen were chosen among the settlers. Of these the prisoners were allowed to challenge any man whom they had reason to suppose prejudiced or hostile to them—no one, however, availed himself of this privilege. They were well aware of the glaring evidence of their guilt, and as Hatfield was not present, it seemed indifferent even to Johnson who among his enemies should be judges or spectators; for he saw but two friendly and familiar faces among the crowd, and these wisely kept themselves in the background, and appeared by no means inclined to take an active part in this drama, so long, at least, as it lay in their power to avoid it. They were Curneales and Ingraham, who stood leaning together against a tree, and, at long intervals only, imparted their observations to each other in a whisper.

"And who will defend the prisoners?" inquired Brown, as two men from the Petit-Jean, together with Stevenson, Curtis, the Canadian, and Cook, stepped forward as accusers.

"With your permission, I will undertake that office," said the stranger, advancing. "My name is Wharton; I am engaged in the practice of the law in Little Rock, and I do not think that you will refuse these unhappy men the aid of counsel."

Some of the Regulators were about to remonstrate against this, but Brown anticipated them, and declared to the stranger that they were willing to intrust him with the defense of the accused, but that he should reflect that they had established here a free Lynch court, independent of the power of the State, and were resolved to maintain its authority and enforce its decrees, whatever might be the consequences.

"But defend these men," he continued, reaching Mr. Wharton his hand; "if there is anything that speaks in their favor, so much the better—far be it from us to act unjustly. But we also to the guilty! The laws of the State have been found too weak to protect us. We stand here now the free inhabitants of these noble forests, and are resolved to protect ourselves. But time passes, and we have a busy and laborious day before us; let us begin."

The accusations were now read, first against Atkins and Weston as receivers of the stolen horses, and against Jones as the thief, or conveyor; and as there were no witnesses to prove him guilty of any former theft, the attention of the court was confined solely to the last case. The secret hiding-place for the purloined animals had been carefully examined, and the result placed Atkins's participation beyond all doubt; as not only were the horses of the Canadian found there, but also two others stolen a short time before from a settler on the La Pave, and the old man was, at last, obliged to confess his guilt.

Weston was then led forward, but he steadfastly persisted in asserting his innocence, when one of the men from the Petit-Jean proposed that he should be whipped until he made a full confession.

Wharton, it is true, protested against this step, but it was of no avail; the majority voted for "dogwood," and the unhappy man was bound to one of those trees, and scourged with a slender hickory sapling, until the blood streamed from his shoulders, and long black streaks covered his sides, extending even to his breast—for at every stroke the extremity of the elastic wood lapped around his body like a rod of whalebone.

Pain at last wrung from him the confession of his own guilt; but no tortures were able to force from his lips the name of a single one of his accomplices, and he at last sunk down in a swoon, overcome by the severity of the punishment.

A few of the Regulators, excited by the sight of blood, and exasperated at the criminal's stubborn silence, cried in wild confusion:

"Hang him! run him up to the oak—he has confessed that he has stolen horses; why waste any more time with him?"

But Brown here interposed, declaring that this was contrary to the settled practice of the tribunal; that all the criminals must first be heard, and the jury would then decide upon the fate of their prisoners.

Jones's guilt was evident, and but one opinion prevailed concerning it; even Wharton could say but little in his favor. Now, however, came the trial for a crime of a deeper dye, to wit, Heathcote's murder, and the Indian stepped forward to accuse Johnson and Rawson, leading the peddler Godwin into the circle.

Godwin testified that he had a few days before received from Rawson, at second hand, one of those bank-notes, which he himself had formerly seen in Heathcote's possession. They were of the State bank of Louisiana, and in addition to this they bore a particular mark upon the back, the

name of a person who had formerly had them in his possession.

The Indian testified that on the day after the murder he had marked off on his tomahawk the measure of the tracks discovered near the spot; that he had afterward compared them with Johnson's and Rawson's tracks, and had found them to agree.

"Johnson afterward attempted to murder the Indian," said Brown; "we all—"

"Why waste the time in further accusations?" cried a voice from the crowd, interrupting him. "The scoundrel deserves hanging for the one murder; if the jury should pronounce him not guilty, which I greatly doubt, it will then be time enough to prove the other."

Wharton now stepped forward to defend the criminal, but before he could begin his speech, the latter started up, notwithstanding his fettered arms, and cried doggedly:

"Silence with your foolery! the knaves have agreed together to hang me, and they'll do it—the pestilence seize them!—but I will, at least, not gratify them so far as to tremble and cry for mercy. Yes, ye cowards! who fall twenty of you upon a single man, I shot the Regulator, and blast me, if I wouldn't with pleasure cut the throats of your whole band."

"Away with him! to the oak! to the oak! hang the whole rascally pack!" cried the crowd, and a few sprung toward the prisoners; but Brown threw himself between them, and cried:

"Hold! order, ye men of Arkansas! we must first try the preacher; the jury will then pronounce upon the guilt of each and all."

"Well, then, forward with Mr. Rawson! bring on the Methodist!" roared the crowd, as they drew back, leaving a clear space in the middle of the circle.

Rawson, on hearing his name uttered by the furious throng, had started, pallid and trembling with terror; but he in vain endeavored to rise; his hands confined him, and Assowaum was obliged, first to unfasten them, and then support the unhappy wretch, enfeebled as he was by pain and the loss of blood, before he was able to stand erect. Still his limbs refused to serve him, his trembling knees knocked together, and he would have fallen to the ground again, had not his watchful guardian caught him and held him upright, and then, when he had collected himself for a moment, led him before the tribunal, the members of which were reclining upon the green turf.

"Jonathan Rawson," said the leader of the Regulators, addressing him in a grave, stern tone, "you stand in the presence of your judges! You are accused—"

"Hold—hold—no further!" said the preacher, almost in a whisper, and glancing wildly and anxiously around him; "no further—you need not accuse me—I will confess all—reveal all, as State's evidence—you can not harm me, therefore—I am now under the protection of the court—I will—"

"The pestilence upon his wretched, dastardly soul!" cried Johnson, indignantly; "see how the coward trembles!"

"If you open your mouth again, without being questioned, cried Harper, who acted as sheriff, "I will beat out your brains with this bit of hickory—do you hear?"

Johnson gnashed his teeth in silence.

"You can not hang me," cried Rawson, upon whose brow and temples stood the clear drops of sweat, "or you must, at least, protect me from this fiend here, who watches over my body as if he hoped to get possession of my soul. I will confess all—I here declare myself ready to turn State's evidence."

A murmur of contempt ran through the crowd. Brown, however, now spoke, and turning to the unhappy wretch, who raised his bound hands toward him in an attitude of entreaty, said:

"Your repentance, Rawson, comes too late; even this can not save you. Thrice guilty of murder, not to mention the base treachery which you have displayed toward a worthy family, nay, toward all the families of this peaceful district, your life is forfeited to this tribunal. Have you anything to say in your defense?"

"Here comes Hatfield with the rest," exclaimed Cook; "but they bring none of the fugitives with them."

At this moment Hatfield rode pretty close to the prisoners, cast to the ground a bundle which he carried before him upon his horse, then leaped from the saddle, and left the beast to itself.

"Have you anything new there, Hatfield, that can throw light upon the business?" inquired Brown.

"Nothing important," replied the Regulator; "here is an old coat that looked rather suspicious, it seemed so carefully washed, and was so well concealed."

"Wagh!" exclaimed the Indian, who now stepped up, and pointed to the place where one of the horn buttons was missing. "Alapaha grasped this button in the death-struggle—and here—here was the wound."

Without waiting for an answer, he approached the preacher, who stood silent and motionless, drew his hunting-knife from his girdle,

and slit up Rawson's left sleeve to the shoulder, where a red and scarcely healed wound was visible, such as might have been inflicted by a tomahawk. Assowaum pointed calmly to the scar, and said softly: "He is the murderer!"

All were silent; it seemed as if each feared to interrupt the dreadful stillness and Rawson's glances wandered from face to face, to find a single one in whose countenance he could discover a sign of compassion and mercy. All stood rigid and cold, and the gloomy earnestness of their features, their closely-knit brows, announced his approaching fate.

"This pocket-book," said Brown, at last, "was also found on the person of this wretch, who, as it seems, has heaped crime upon crime to accomplish his dark designs. The sum contained in it—eleven hundred dollars—nearly corresponds with that which the cattle-dealer, who was murdered on the banks of the Arkansas, was said to have had about him. Mr. Stevenson has recognized Rawson as the person whom he saw with that man, on the same day, a few moments before the deed was committed."

"Do you know this penknife, Rawson?" he then said, addressing the trembling murderer; "do you know these stains of blood upon it?"

Rawson turned shuddering away and groaned forth, pointing to Johnson—"He gave me the counsel—why put all upon me? why cast every crime upon my shoulders?"

"And you confess that you are guilty—guilty of three murders?" said Hatfield.

"Yes—yes—I will confess all—all—still more—still more fearful deeds—I will tell you of the Mississippi—"

"I protest against this proceeding," said Wharton, hastily stepping forward; "you are enticing from this unhappy man a confession of his guilt, while he still nourishes the hope of being pardoned and set at liberty as State's evidence. In addition to this, you have forced a confession from young Weston, or whatever he is called, by torture, as it were, and—"

"Sir," said Brown, quietly interrupting him, "I told you at first that you were in the presence of no legally-established and regularly-constituted tribunal. Before such a tribunal the worst criminals escaped punishment by the subtle tricks of advocates—because, perhaps, there is some trifling irregularity in the indictment—or because a witness is out of the way, or some such loophole found, by which the man who has money can get off clear. We are an assembly of *Regulators*, and the law which we enforce is *Lynch law*. These men have been accused, and will be punished, if they are found guilty. If you can prove to us, or even give us reason to hope that a single one of them is innocent, I assure you, in advance, that he shall go hence free and unhindered. That, according to my judgment, is the only thing that you have to do in this business. What is the verdict of the jury concerning Atkins?"

"Let me go!" shrieked Rawson, in despair—"let me go—and I will confess things that—"

"Be silent! I will save you!" said the advocate in a whisper.

The wretched man looked up to him in astonishment, and a faint gleam of joy shot across his features, but he encountered only the warning glance of the stranger, as he turned from him toward the jury, who were consulting together at a little distance concerning the guilt or innocence of the accused.

After a short while, they returned with the unanimous sentence—"Guilty!"

Atkins covered his pallid face with his hands, and sunk upon his knees.

"And Weston?" asked Brown.

"Guilty!"

"And Jones?"

"Guilty!"

"And Johnson?"

"Guilty!"

"And Rawson?"

"Guilty! guilty!" cried the jury, in a fearful, thrilling chorus. Weston sobbed aloud, while Johnson gnashed his teeth, darting furious glances at his judges.

"You have heard!" said Brown, after a long pause, during which Rawson, forgetting everything else around him, followed every movement of the stranger, by whose aid, as if he were endowed with superhuman power, he alone hoped to escape his doom.

"The tribunal of the Regulators hereby declares you guilty, and sentences you to be hanged for your crimes!" said Brown, in a firm deep tone.

"Away with them!" cried voices from the crowd; "hang them upon the nearest trees—feed the buzzards with the hounds!"

"Hold!" exclaimed Brown, stretching out his hand, to keep back those who were pressing upon the prisoners—"hold! The court has condemned them, but, men of Arkansas, let us not proceed like savage beasts against our fellow-men—all have not deserved equal punishment. Is there no one among them whom you are willing to pardon?"

"Atkins's child died last night," said Wilson, stepping forward; "his wife lies very ill. He purposed to emigrate to Texas—I think we might let him go."

A momentary stillness followed. Atkins glared with staring, tearless eyes from one to the other.

"I vote for pardon!" said Brown.

"And I!" cried Hatfield. "Do not let us, comrades, stain our first tribunal with too much blood. I beg also for Weston's life; the poor devil has made a full confession of his crime; we can not find fault with him for refusing to betray his accomplices; I, for my part applaud him for it. Will you not consider him as sufficiently punished by his chastisement that he has received?"

"Yes!" said the men, after a short silence.

"Mercy! mercy!" implored Jones, who was convinced from the whole conduct of the Regulators how resolute they were to act with energy, and who resolved to profit by this first bright moment—"mercy for me also! this is my first offense, and, besides, I belong to another county."

"That would help you but little," said Brown.

"I vote, however, that we deliver up this man, who belongs neither on the La Fave nor the Petit-Jean, to the tribunals of Little Rock; let them punish him as they see fit. I think we may be assured that he will never visit the banks of the La Fave again."

"Away with him!" cried several voices; "give him up to the sheriff."

"It's cheating the rope!" said Curtis. "The fellow is a knave and a thief, and if they do shut him up in the penitentiary in Little Rock, he will break his way out—that's of course—and he will afterward laugh at us into the bargain."

"Never! by my salvation!" cried Jones, anxiously, who had his forebodings probably.

"I wouldn't give much for that any way," replied Curtis. "I vote, therefore, that we first make him acquainted with our different kinds of wood: hickory, dogwood, etc., afterward he can go where he likes; he will, at least, take with him a kind memorial of our little stream."

"Curtis is right," said Brown. "If the men of Arkansas are contented, therefore, the negro yonder may give him sixty lashes."

"Gentlemen!" cried Jones, anxiously.

"Sixty are really too few," cried Bowitt, when the others had voted for this punishment; "yet, in that case, we must choose some one besides the nigger to execute the sentence. I think that—"

"Hold!" cried the Canadian, interrupting him, "I'll give the lashes—I have a little debt against him."

"Mercy! mercy!" implored Jones, who well knew how this half-breed would deal with his back.

"You have it!" said Brown, turning from him; "you deserved the rope. Away with him!"

"And Johnson and Rawson?" asked Hatfield, gazing slowly around the circle, while the Canadian led the trembling Jones aside.

"Death!" The word echoed gloomily and monotonously from every lip.

"Oh, sir, if you mean to save me," said Rawson, with deathlike pallor in his face, addressing the stranger in a whisper, "it is high time—you do not know the Regulators—"

"Silence! and depend upon me," said the lawyer in a cautious whisper.

Wilson had, in the meanwhile, cut Atkins's bands, and offered him his horse to ride home. The latter nodded gratefully, loosed the bridle from the branch to which it was fastened, and was about to mount into the saddle; then he bethought himself again; he stood for several seconds leaning upon the pommel of the saddle, returned suddenly and reached his hand in silence, first to Wilson, then to Brown, and then to Hatfield—pressed theirs warmly—leaped into the saddle, and rode at full speed toward his dwelling.

Brown gazed after him thoughtfully, and then said, turning to Wilson:

"I shouldn't wonder if Atkins became an honest man."

"Save me—or it will be too late!" whispered Rawson, once again in deathlike anguish; "you have promised it—you must save me!"

"Lead the prisoners to death!" said Brown, in a low but sonorous voice.

"Hold!" cried the lawyer, now interposing—"hold, in the name of justice! It is true these criminals are worthy of death; but I here protest openly against these illegal proceedings, which are as much murder as the murders which are charged against these unhappy men. Deliver them into my hands, and I will enter a complaint against them before the tribunals of the State, but here—"

"Do your duty!" replied Brown, calmly, without heeding this remonstrance. "Has either of the prisoners anything to say?"

"I will reveal all!" screamed Rawson—"listen to me—I will reveal all, if you will save my life—I will toil in prison for years—but save my life!—only save my life! I have fearful things to disclose."

"Your life is forfeited!" replied the stern judge, gravely; "prepare for death!"

"Back!" screamed the wretched man, as the Regulators approached to seize him; "stand

back! I have offered to turn State's evidence."

"Hold!" said the Indian, in a soft, low tone, who thus far had cowered like a panther, ready to spring upon the fettered form of the preacher, but who now rose to his full height, and laid his hand upon the shoulder of the criminal, who shrunk back at his touch—"this man is Assowaum's! the Regulators have pronounced him guilty, but Assowaum must be his executioner!"

"No—no—no!" shrieked the Methodist, in all the terror of despair—"no—anything but that—away—away with me, ye Regulators!—hang me!—hang me here on this tree!—no, not here—further away—a hundred paces—a half mile—but do not deliver me into the hands of this fiend—help! help!"

Assowaum, without waiting for an answer from the Regulators, bound the arms of his victim with a leathern thong, and, notwithstanding his desperate struggles, raised him like a child from the ground.

"Gentlemen, this is horrible!" said the advocate, shuddering; "you will not permit this savage to drag the man into the woods, and there torture him to death?"

Not one of the Regulators answered a syllable. All gazed in silence upon the Indian, whose features, calm and unaltered, betrayed not the slightest tokens of what was passing in his bosom. Even Johnson seemed, for a moment, to have forgotten the danger of his situation.

"Have compassion!" screamed Rawson; "my life is forfeited to this court—have compassion! save me from the fiend who has seized me!"

The Indian bore him from the circle, and proceeded down the narrow foot-path, which led to the bottom-land, and thence to the river.

"I can not suffer that!" cried the stranger, and he hastened after the chief, resolved to rescue the unhappy man, at least, from the clutches of the vindictive savage; but when Assowaum heard his steps behind him, he turned toward the advocate and cried, in a tone of menace:

"Follow me upon my dark path, and thou wilt never return to thy kindred—I know thee!"

"Save me!" entreated Rawson; "by your salvation, save me!"

Assowaum turned, and the next moment had disappeared in the thicket with his victim, while Wharton stood, as if rooted to the ground, and stared, half-musing, half-unconscious, after the slowly receding form of the red warrior.

No one upon the hill ventured to interrupt the solemn stillness; all stood, thrilled with horror, in their places, scarcely daring to breathe; Brown alone stepped softly and noiselessly to the verge of the rock, which projected over the river, and, with his arm entwined around a young oak, gazed out over the bed of the stream. There, with slow and quiet strokes of his paddle, the Indian was gliding onward in his canoe, while in the fore part of the bark lay the fettered form of the Methodist.

Jones's cries of pain first roused the men from their stupor. The half-breed, who had seen nothing extraordinary in the conduct of the chief, had taken advantage of the interval of silence to bind the criminal to a young dogwood-tree, and now, with the best will in the world, was belaboring his bare back with a stout but pliable hickory stem, notwithstanding the culprit, writhing beneath the painful strokes, cried and shrieked, saying he had already had sixty, one-and-sixty, two-and-sixty, three-and-sixty lashes.

Brown at last interfered and freed the unhappy wretch from his tormentor, who seemed in no wise inclined to cease at the appointed number, and wished, as he candidly confessed, to spoil the rascal's appetite for horseflesh altogether, while he was about it.

In the meanwhile another group had led Johnson to the tree appointed for his execution. Bowitt, for the last time, admonished him to pray, but in answer he spit in his face, and turned his back to him scornfully. Not a word either of entreaty or complaint passed his lips; and the Regulators, exasperated at this last display of hardihood, without further ceremony fastened the rope about his neck, and lifted him upon a horse. The negro was then directed to climb the tree and tie the rope to a projecting bough, while Curtis took the bridle from the pony which stood quietly beneath its burden.

Johnson's elbows had been pinioned to his sides, and he sat erect upon the saddle; the rope reached directly upward; so soon as the horse took a single step to feed upon the grass that grew around in luxuriant abundance, he would be left dangling in the air.

Still the pony neither moved nor stirred, but looked with its large dark eyes from one to another of the men, as if it knew and understood why every glance was fastened upon it in breathless expectation.

"Of what use is all this buffoonery?" cried Johnson, in a tone between anger and terror, while the cold sweat stood upon his brow; "take the horse away and make an end of the business!"

It needed but a single pressure of his heel, and the pony would have leaped from under him; but he did not move a muscle; the beast stood equally motionless.

Brown now sprung into the saddle and galloped down the hill; the rest followed him, with the exception of Jones, the Canadian, and a few who remained to have an eye upon Wharton.

The horse of the condemned criminal still stood motionless, and Johnson gazed, half insolently, half in terror at the men near him.

"Come!" said the half-breed, turning to Jones; "I know what you are thinking of, but you sha'n't spoil the man's sport—away with you!"

"But just let me—"

"Away, I say, or, I—we are now alone." With these words, he brandished one of the hickory rods with which he had provided himself. The next moment the spot was deserted, and Johnson sat alone, beneath his gibbet, upon the quiet and motionless beast.

CHAPTER XII.

WHILE upon the rocky height, on the La Fave, lynch-law was condemning and punishing the guilty, unmingled joy prevailed in Roberts's dwelling, where until now Marion's mother had lain, pale and motionless, upon her bed. The Regulators had departed with their prisoners: the sun stood high above the tree-tops, and still Mrs. Roberts had as yet given no sign of returning consciousness; when, suddenly, as old Roberts began, with a very grave and thoughtful face, to walk the chamber—as Marion, weeping silently, knelt and prayed at the bedside—and Ellen, hushed and sorrowful, was seated near her, holding the cold hand of the old dame in her own—the latter unclosed her eyes in wonder, with but a faint comprehension of what had passed, and glanced upon Marion, who sprung up, and with a cry of joy cast herself upon the neck of her reviving mother, who then said, in a low voice:

"My child! my dear child! are you restored to me again? Have you returned to us once more? Has the—God be gracious to me! my head swims when I think of it—has the fiend, who appeared to us in the form of that man, obtained no power over you?"

"No, mother—my dear, good mother!" cried the delighted maiden; "all is now well, since you have opened your eyes so bright and clear again; now, all will turn out happily."

"But—what has passed, my child? Is it morning or evening? It seems to me that I have dreamed away a long, long time. Where have all these people come from?"

"Margaret," said Roberts, who had approached softly, and now seated himself upon a stool near his wife's bed—"Margaret, dear good soul, how do you feel?"

"Roberts here—and Mr. Barker—and Harper—and Ellen? Didn't you ride off? Have I only dreamed it, then?"

"You shall hear all, dear mother," replied Marion, in a soothing tone; "but now do keep quiet and rest."

"Rest!" repeated her mother, rising from her bed, "rest! I feel strong and well, only my head still swims a little. But tell me, oh, tell me, what has passed—Roberts—Barker—Harper—what is the matter with the men, they all look so serious?"

"Nothing is the matter with them, Mrs. Roberts," replied Barker, as he stepped forward and shook her by the hand, "not in the least; not now, at any rate. So long as you lay there, cold and pale as a corpse, we were not very cheery here in the chamber, and perhaps our faces still have rather a stupid look; besides, Harper here is half sick himself. But now, out with it, Marion! it's best she should know all at once, especially as it's nothing evil, and then her heart will be relieved, and ours too."

Marion was now obliged to begin and relate what had passed from the first moment, when Rawson rushed into the house, and Cotton left his hiding-place; how they had been bound, and how Ellen had freed her hands. She omitted nothing; neither Assowaum's sudden appearance, nor the heroic act of her friend, nor their rescue by "the Regulators," by which general appellation the sweet girl timidly evaded all mention of the man whom she loved. All this she recounted to her listening mother, who held her hand fast locked within her own, still thinking her dear child in danger, and unwilling to release her clasp for fear of losing her anew.

"To you, then, my dear girl—to you alone, in truth—I owe the life of my daughter," said Mrs. Roberts, turning to the blushing Ellen, and reaching her the hand that was at liberty.

"To me? Ah, no!" replied the latter, timidly; "my aid was very trifling. The pistol—I don't know—but I think it must have gone off of itself; at least I have always been afraid of firearms—"

"Ellen was certainly our rescuing angel!" said Marion, interrupting her. "The Indian would have been killed but for that shot, and after him, perhaps, the next one that followed; at all events, the furious man would have sacrificed us to his rage. Ellen was certainly the heroine of the night."

"But where are the rest? Where are Mr. Curtis, Brown and Wilson," asked the good dame, "who, with the Indian, ventured their

ives so boldly and disinterestedly to save you? Ah, they deserve the warmest thanks!"

Harper gave a significant cough at the word "disinterestedly," and a deep blush crimsoned Marion's face.

"The men are trying the rascals," answered Roberts, "and, if you hadn't been ill, I should have been present at the Regulators' court. When such crimes are committed, honest men should bestir themselves. The knaves must, once for all, be taught that the old spirit is not yet dead in us backwoodsmen. But they will manage the business without us who are here, where we have enough to do—"

"But didn't you say," asked Mrs. Roberts, with a shudder, "that that man—that Rawson—"

"Let the matter rest for the present, wife," replied Roberts, interrupting her. "When you are well and hearty, we will take further about the business; and by that time we shall know what sentence the court has passed upon them. And now, girls, dish up the best that kitchen and smoke-house can furnish. We celebrate a festival to-day—a festival of rescue—and a double one, indeed, in both a spiritual and corporeal sense; for, corporeally, we are rid of those infernal horse-thieves, who left not a hoof safe in the stable; they attempted lately to steal Hopper's roan from his very barnyard, and his fence is over eleven feet high. But then he has no riders upon it, and I have often told him—"

And in a spiritual sense we can thank the Lord even more," said Barker, interrupting him, as he saw that Roberts was spurring at full speed toward New York; "now the preaching will abate a little."

"But, Mr. Barker," said the dame, in a reproachful tone, "would you throw the guilt of the hypocrite upon so holy a cause?"

"No, certainly not," replied Barker, desirous of avoiding everything which might annoy the still feeble woman, "certainly not. But it will have this good effect: it will make us more careful in our choice of a preacher, and rightly, too. A burned child dreads the fire."

"Hallo, there!" cried Harper, interrupting; "let us drop this subject until we have a regular meal in our stomachs. We have been sitting near the bed here since last evening, and I am almost famished."

"Your hunger shall at once be satisfied, dear Mr. Harper," said Marion, reaching him her delicate hand, with a smile; "you mustn't be angry, for mother—"

"Hush, hush! no excuses," replied the little man, laughing, "I know all—I haven't felt the hunger until just this moment. But now that it comes I say so, right off, before it's too late; it can't be very far from noon."

"What do you say to riding over to the court?" asked Barker. "I have a monstrous inclination to take part in it."

"We should get there too late," replied Roberts. "The place is a good way off and we had better wait here. Brown and Wilson have both promised to ride over this evening and tell us the result. It is very kind in them."

"Very," said Harper, casting a side glance at Marion. The latter, however, who was busied at the cupboard, seemed not to have heard the remark; while Ellen turned at the same moment and began, with extraordinary zeal, to blow the almost extinguished coals upon the hearth into a light blaze, and laid on wood in order to prepare dinner for the guests.

In the meanwhile, evening approached. Mrs. Roberts had quite recovered; and, as the weather was mild and warm, they all seated themselves beneath the blossoming dogwood trees in the little garden, which produced not only nutritious vegetables, but also wild-flowers that were cherished and fostered by Marion's hands, and gave to the little spot an unusually cheerful and friendly aspect. Although the conversation turned at times upon more distant and different subjects, yet all eyes were invariably directed toward the quarter where they expected their friends to appear; and again the probable result of those grave proceedings became the axis around which revolved their conjectures and remarks.

"But they will not punish him so very severely," said Mrs. Roberts, at last, after a short pause, during which she had gazed thoughtfully upon the ground. "If his wound was so severe, is not that 'hastisement enough'?"

"For such a crime?" rejoined her husband, in a grave and admonitory tone. The good dame shuddered and hid her face in her hands.

"The Indian felt compassion for him," said Marion, timidly. "He tended him with a care of which I did not think him capable."

"The Indian?" asked the old dame, gazing at her daughter in wonder, "the Indian tended the—murderer of his wife?" she repeated, still incredulous and astonished.

"Yes—as we tend the cattle that we mean to butcher," replied Barker, with a slight shudder. "Never did the Indian appear so frightful to me. I cannot drive away the picture."

"And you—poor, poor child!" said her mother, turning with eyes full of love to her daughter, who was sitting beside her, "who will make you amends for this frightful deception?"

"Brown—there he comes!" cried old Roberts; while Marion at first glanced up to him in dismay, and now, trembling and blushing, hid her face in her mother's bosom.

"And there is Wilson, too!" exclaimed Harper. "Now we shall know how matters have been settled."

"They look very serious and solemn," said Barker.

"It is a serious and solemn business that they have completed," replied Roberts; "but they have at the same time exercised a fair and noble right—the right of self-defense and self-protection—and this right we will maintain in Arkansas, so long as we have marrow in our bones and blood in our veins!"

At this moment the two men rode up, leaped from their horses, sprung over the fence and greeted their friends with hearty words and a warm pressure of the hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SMALL, light canoe, guided by a sure hand, was gliding gently and noiselessly beneath the trembling, overshadowing reeds, and the waving willows which bent far down over the green bed of the joyously-rippling stream. Not a sound was heard, as, after each stroke, the paddle rose swiftly from the water—not a sound was heard as it was dipped as rapidly again into the flood. The deer which had come down to the water drank on in quiet; scarcely fifty paces distant the dark object moved on, silent and spectral; the animal did not see it, and not until it gradually disappeared in the distance, leaving the shadow of the cane beneath which it was gliding, did the timid beast start, toss its fine head aloft, snuff and stamp the pebbly bank with its forefoot, and then retreat slowly and proudly into the thicket from which it had just emerged. The treacherous breeze had borne to it the scent of its enemy.

The canoe advanced smoothly and noiselessly, and the whirling bubbles which reached the surface, raised, boiling and eddying, by each powerful stroke of the paddle, alone proclaimed the path which it pursued, as they rose in small, single whirlpools and were again dissipated and swallowed up by the stream which had engendered them.

In the stern of the canoe Assowaum was seated, impelling it onward, and directing its course, while in the front part of the bark lay the Methodist, bound and half swooning from terror and exhaustion.

The prow of the slender skiff was now directed obliquely across the river; in a few moments it touched the smooth pebbles of the shallow shore, and with a shudder Rawson recognized the spot. It was just below the hut in which he had on that night murdered the wife of the man whose prisoner he now was, and from whose vengeance no earthly power could protect him.

Assowaum leaped to the shore, wound the grape-vine which served him for a rope around a small birch-tree, then returned to the canoe, and, slowly and carefully lifting up his prisoner carried him to land.

"What do you mean to do, Assowaum?" said the latter, in a hoarse and trembling voice. He received no answer. "Speak! in the name of Heaven, speak!" cried the wretched man in despair—"speak! and let me know the worst!" In silence the Indian bore him up the bank, and into the hut, the scene of his crime.

Rawson turned his face in terror from the well-known spot, and closed his eyes. Assowaum, however, laid him quietly down in the middle of the hut, close to a small hickory sapling, which had shot up from the soil, while not a sound broke the deathlike stillness of the place, except the heavy breathing of the unhappy victim. It was the same spot on which Alapaha's body had lain. The preacher, unable longer to endure the trying uncertainty of his position, looked up, and beheld the Indian crouching near him, watching with the utmost care his slightest movements, and, as it seemed, completely wrapped in the contemplation of his victim. A triumphant smile passed across his gloomy features, as he remarked the expression of anguish and of terror in Rawson's countenance, and he now rose noiselessly, took from his belt a leathern thong, and fastened his prisoner, carefully and firmly, to the tough young sapling near which he lay.

In vain the unhappy man promised him wealth and treasures; in vain he told him of gold that he had buried; in vain he offered to give all to him, his enemy, if he would set him at liberty, or, at least, end his torment with a blow of his tomahawk. In silence, as if he had not heard the words which the preacher breathed passionately into his ear, the "Feathered Arrow" completed his task; then leaving him helpless, bound hand and foot, and held to the ground by the young stem he went from the hut, and soon reappeared, bringing dry leaves and withered branches.

Now, for the first time, a dark foreboding flashed across the brain of the unhappy man—he knew the customs of the savage Indians of the West—he knew their pitiless cruelty, and a wild and piercing shriek broke from his heaving breast, and he struggled furiously, but vainly, to rend his bands. The Indian did not

prevent him—a gag would have silenced his cries of pain, but no—each tone was music to his ear, and smiling, he bent down, and blew the smoking leaves to a flame. Having done this, he quickly brought a number of split pine-sticks, and soon a circle of fire lighted along the walls of the hut, blazed aloft, and gradually caught the withered branches.

Louder and louder echoed the preacher's piercing shrieks through the silent wood, while more and more industriously the Indian fed the flame, and soon the victim was inclosed as in a wide sea of fire.

Not until now, when the heat had become insupportable, and had blistered his skin in many places, did Assowaum leave the glowing chamber, and brandishing his tomahawk, begin, without the hut, his song of victory and triumph.

Within were heard the screams and groans of the preacher, rising high above the crackling and snapping of the dried leaves and stems while the dense smoke ascended heavily amid the green leafy vault, and forced a passage into the bright, clear air of spring. But here it paused; like a dark and gloomy veil, the gray and yellowish cloud rested upon the expanse of leaves, from which it had scarcely ascended.

Wild and more terrible rose the appalling shrieks of the preacher—louder and more triumphant the song of the Obidjewa, so that a wolf which harbored near leaped up and fled in fear to seek a more peaceful and lonely couch.

The rafters of the crumbling roof at last gave way; thousands of sparks rose hissing and crackling in the air; one long, agonizing yell was heard from the sea of flame, a cloud of smoke rolled heavily over the spot, and all was over!

The sun sunk blood-red behind the distant mountain-ridges; but near the charred and blackened ruins stood the red warrior, brandishing his weapon, and in wild, monotonous tones, singing his song of vengeance and of victory.

CHAPTER XIV.

"So, then, Brown, you have really been in love with the girl all the while, and haven't said a word to me about it?" cried old Roberts, holding the young man's hand tightly clasped in his own.

Brown pressed it in silence, and then replied, in a tone of deep emotion:

"What would have been the use, sir? I had come too late, and I could not complain."

"And that scoundrel had almost—"

"He is punished," said Brown, interrupting him. "But now, tell me frankly, are you willing to intrust your daughter's happiness in my hands?"

"Whew! Come, come, Brown!" cried the old man in astonishment, and his exclamation was accompanied by a loud burst of laughter; "you ask the question as if I had anything to say in the business—had I in Rawson's case?"

"Roberts!" exclaimed the mother, with a glance of entreaty.

"But the girl is the principal person to be consulted," he cried, shaking his head.

"Father!" said Marion, who had thus far concealed her face upon her mother's bosom, and now wound her arms lovingly about the old man's neck.

"Ah, ha!" said the latter, half smiling, half in astonishment; "the business stands so then? When the deer starts at once, the hunter has an easy game," he cried, shaking his forefinger at Brown, while he kissed his daughter upon the forehead. "It seems this isn't the first time you have been upon the track."

"And her mother?" asked Brown, leading the sweet, blushing girl toward her.

"Take her, sir," said the old woman, in a tremulous tone; "she seems to be attached to you, and I—I, alas, have lost the right to guide her in her choice."

"Mother," said Marion, in an entreating tone, "do not speak so! you thought you were securing my happiness."

"Yes, that I thought so my child the Almighty is my witness! I thought it with a firm and heartfelt conviction; but the Lord alone knows the hearts of men—we poor mortals are weak and blind."

"Thanks, thanks! my best thanks!" cried Brown, pressing the maiden to his bosom. "I hope you will never repent having intrusted me your only child."

"And the lad does not think of asking my permission?" said Harper, who now approached with moist eyes, and clasped his nephew in his arms; "the rascal doesn't act as if he had an uncle."

"I know your kindness, my dear uncle," cried the young man, joyfully embracing him, "and a happier and more cheerful life is in store for you also."

"Yes," said Harper, passing his coat-sleeve quickly across his eyes, then releasing his nephew he took his future niece by the hand, "it was necessary that this way of life should end; I couldn't have stood it much longer. Barker here and I thought of emigrating next month."

"Where to?" asked Mrs. Roberts, in astonishment.

"Where to?" said Harper; "not far—into the land of matrimony. But the lad looks as if he thought me too old. Listen, fellow!"

"Yonder come horsemen!" cried Barker, pointing in the direction of the river, and, in a few moments, Stevenson, Cook, and Curtis reined in their horses upon the open space before the house.

Stevenson was warmly welcomed by Marion and her mother, who were old friends and former neighbors of his, but he shook his head and smiled when Mrs. Roberts reproached him for not having brought his wife and daughters to visit her, as she had not seen them for so long a time.

"We might ride up there in the morning," said Roberts.

"It's not necessary," cried Stevenson; "you will see enough of us—till you're sick and tired."

"How so? do you remain here?" asked Roberts, quickly.

"I have bought Atkins's farm," said the old Tennessean; "the country here pleases me. The poor devil wanted to move, and—I struck a bargain with him."

"But you can't have seen the place, for that night—"

"It wasn't necessary," said Stevenson laughing; "if the farm don't suit me, why, Crawford county won't run away in the meanwhile; but if it's what Mr. Curtis and Mr. Cook here describe it, I sha'n't have to move again. I like the neighbors, too, now that this thievish pack has been cleared out, and I begin to see that the La Fave isn't so bad as people made it out to be."

"Well said, Stevenson! well said!" cried Roberts shaking his hand with unfeigned delight. "To-day is a lucky day. I'll be d—d—foxes and wolves! listen, old woman! you must let me swear a little to-day, or it won't come out as heartily; but I'll be d—d if I know the time when I've been so happy. Children—but where's Ellen?—the brave girl mustn't be away."

"She's in the house," said Brown.

"Alone in the house? Why doesn't she come out?—she belongs now to the family."

"Mr. Wilson, I believe, has taken care that she shouldn't be alone," replied Brown, smiling.

"Ah, ha!" cried Roberts; "is the turkey perched on that tree? Well, then, since she won't come to us, let us go to her. But you are all my guests—and Stevenson, where the deuce is your boy?"

"I sent him back to the women to quiet them," said the old man.

"So!—Stevenson, you must bring your family down to-morrow morning—we'll set up a tent here, and next week—or as soon as the young folks please—for, of course, they have the main voice in the matter—or they take it, at least—which, when well—"

"Considered, is perfectly right," cried Harper, interrupting him. "Then we'll have the marriage—and afterward," he continued, with a comical side-glance at Brown, "a certain young man will leave his old uncle in the lurch, bestride a stout bay, and ride to—"

"Little Rock, uncle," said Brown, reaching him his hand; "there to buy the land, on which he will henceforth live, with his old uncle, and his dear wife on the La Fave."

"And will not the Governor try to punish you Regulators for breaking the laws?" said Marion, glancing in the face of her betrothed, while she pressed more closely to his bosom.

"Let him!" said the young man, with a smile, touching the maiden's forehead with a gentle kiss; "we have asserted our rights, and destroyed the brood of serpents, which glided, scattering their poison, through these glorious woods. It was his weakness that tempted those wretches hither, where they hoped to commit crime after crime unpunished, if not undiscovered. The Regulators have shown them the power which the simple farmer is able to exercise, when necessity and his own safety command it. The danger is now over, and we will gladly exchange the sword of justice for the peaceful plowshare of the husbandman."

The rest is soon told.

As to Wilson and Ellen, old Roberts had, to use an Arkansas phrase, by no means "barked up the wrong tree." Before the week had passed the neighboring justice of the peace joined the hands of the two couples; and while Brown rode to Little Rock, to see to the purchase of his land, Wilson wrote to his old mother in Memphis, inviting her to pass the remnant of her days in peace and quiet beneath his roof.

Atkins left the La Fave on the morning following the trial, encamping for a short time, however, in order to conclude his bargain with Stevenson. This was done through the agency of Curneales, for he could not make up his mind to have any friendly dealings with the man by whose instrumentality he had been entrapped and delivered over to punishment and disgrace. He had an interview with Wilson, however, and Ellen also bade farewell to her foster-parents before they left the State forever.

Nothing further was ever heard of Cotton's fate. A canoe, however, was found drifting in

the river, below the settlement, upset and pierced by a rifle-ball; there was but little doubt that it was the same in which the associates had intended to escape—no traces, however, were to be found of Cotton, and, as no further tracks were discovered on either shore, the rumor soon gained general credit that the fugitive, if not actually hit by one of the balls that the Regulators sent after him, had been upset with the boat, and, being incumbered by his clothes, had probably perished in the river. As little was heard of the fate of the mulatto, although the men who, a few days after, cut down and buried Johnson's body, maintained that they had caught a glimpse of a dark form on the border of the cane-brake, which extends from the shore of the La Fave toward the bluff.

Immediately after the close of the court, the lawyer, from Little Rock, had leaped upon his horse, and ridden on at full speed, but, as was afterward discovered, not in the direction of Little Rock, where no one lived who was known by the name of Wharton.

After the death of the Methodist, the Indian encamped for nine days near the spot where his wife was buried, kept up a fire there, and daily brought his offering of meat and drink to the grave. On the morning of the tenth day, however, he entered Harper's dwelling, equipped for a journey, with his rifle and blanket, and, gravely and silently, reached his hand to his friend, and bade him farewell.

"And will not the 'Feathered Arrow' end his days near his friend?" said Brown, in a tone of heartfelt interest. "Assowaum has no one to cook for him and mend his moccasins—will he not remain beneath the roof of his white brother?"

"My brother is good," said Assowaum, nodding his head; "his heart has the same meaning as his words. But Assowaum must hunt. The white men have killed the game on the La Fave; the tracks of the deer have become scarce, and the bears seldom stray into the bottom-land; the cattle of the whites have thinned the cane-brakes in the swamps, and the bear lurks about and finds no bed. Assowaum is sick; buffalo-meat will make him well. He is going toward the setting sun."

"At least do not go so very far, and when you are weary of roaming return to us; here you have a home."

"My brother is good—Assowaum will think of his words."

"And Ellen? have you bidden her farewell?" inquired Brown.

"Assowaum never forgets those who have been kind to him," said the Indian; "the maiden saved his life, and more—she saved his vengeance. Assowaum's path leads by her dwelling—good-by!"

Once more the chief shook the hand of his friend with emotion, then that of his young wife—once more he waved to them a last farewell, then leaped the low fence, and the next moment the dense foliage of the bushes closed behind him, as he disappeared in the forest—the green, blossoming, sweet-scented forest.

THE END.

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